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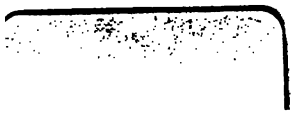
THE MYSTERIOUS ABDUCTION

G. S. GOODMAN



THE MYSTERIOUS ABDUCTION

POPULAR FICTION

BARONESS ORCZY
- BEAU BROCADE
- THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL
- I WILL REPAY
- A SON OF THE PEOPLE

CYRUS BRADY
- BLUE OCEAN'S DAUGHTER

LUCAS CLEEVE
- THE CARDINAL AND LADY SUSAN

HON. MRS. WALTER FORBES
- LEROUX

MAY WYNNE
- LET ERIN REMEMBER

TRISTRAM COUTTS
- THE PRODIGAL CITY

CECIL LOWIS
- THE AVA MINING SYNDICATE

PETER EARLSTON
- THE PLACE TAKER

E. BLACK
- BRENDAVALE

GERALD BISS
- BRANDED

M. Y. HALIDOM
- ZOE'S REVENGE

GURNER GILLMAN
- A SUBURBAN SCANDAL

The Mysterious Abduction

BY

G. S. GOODMAN

LONDON:
GREENING & CO., LIMITED
1908.

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The Mysterious Abduction

CHAPTER I

The events that I am about to describe are so fraught with mystery and horror, that they will probably appear to those who peruse their narration, as incredible, until the explanation is supplied. Although full of life and energy, loving adventure and excitement, the awful anxiety to which I was subjected, during the period over which these events extended, together with the unlooked for and hideously dramatic sequel, prostrated me for months and has left its mark upon me for ever.

I am Court Arndt of the Archdukedom of Bremlauz, a domain situated within the Austrian Empire, my ancestors having held their titles since the days of the Third Crusade.

At the time these adventures befell me, I was twenty-seven years of age, and had succeeded to my inheritance three years previously upon the death of my beloved father, whose demise was the last of a series of misfortunes which had occurred to our family since the period of my birth.

I was engaged to be married in the following spring to the Countess Linzorf, a lady of peerless beauty, who had sprung from an ancestry as proud as my own and whose lands adjoined those of Arndt. Marguerite was a few days from her majority and lived with her guardian four miles from my home, in the Chateau Maros. Her father had been killed in the wars when she had barely reached the age of three years; the shock so affected her mother that she followed her husband to the grave a year later. General Von Graubler, an old friend of the dead count, had promised at the deathbed of the mother to act as her daughter's guardian, and Marguerite's girlhood had been spent in his Chateau of Maros.

The general was unmarried and his household affairs were conducted by a spinster sister, a person of a particularly acrimonious disposition. Von Graubler himself, although raising no objections to the attentions of his ward's most eligible suitors, adopted a sullen and quietly aggressive mood towards them; he received the news of and sanctioned the espousal with cold congratulations and ill-concealed malice. This behaviour, together with the fact that he was known to be a relatively poor man, gave colour to the insinuation that he had hoped to gain the affections of his beautiful ward for himself.

It was my custom to spend several hours during three evenings in each week with my loved one. Upon the first Thursday in October, 1770, I had called as usual, but found Marguerite preoccupied

and dull. For some little time past I had noticed a great change in her manner, but attributed this to the increasing boorishness of her guardian and had almost definitely decided to mention the matter to him, only being restrained by the thought that it might give offence to Marguerite. On this occasion, however, she was so obviously distressed that I determined to ascertain the cause.

She was seated in a little room in the rear of the chateau, which was devoted to her musical instruments, and had just completed a sweet melody of her own composition, upon the harp. As the strains of the music died away, whilst even the strings still vibrated from the touch of her fingers, the ecstasy her playing aroused appeared to give place to a reverie of an unpleasant nature. Her glorious golden brown hair had escaped from its bonds and fell upon the clinging robe of blue silk; into the brown eyes usually so soft with indefinable sweetness and tenderness there had crept a terror that appalled me; she became completely oblivious to her surroundings, absolutely absorbed by the contemplation of some dreadful thing.

"Marguerite!" I exclaimed. She started from her dream and placed her hand upon her heart.

"My love," I said, rising and taking both her hands in mine, "something troubles you."

"Oh, it is nothing," she murmured, desirous apparently of not alarming me.

"But there is something, and I have a right to know; it is the general, and he has forgotten his

manners again, he shall recommence his education with the point of my sword as his tutor.

"Indeed! Indeed! it is nothing to do with him. You are very hasty, Adrian."

"You wish to shield him, but I refuse to allow you to suffer further persecution."

"I have told you the truth," Marguerite replied, looking at me with dignity, "it has nothing to do with my guardian, and there is moreover something mysterious happening. I think upon second thoughts that you ought to know about it. Three times during the last fortnight I have raised my eyes to find those of a masked stranger fixed upon me; once whilst walking in the chateau grounds, I saw his head upon the outside of the boundary wall; as I looked, so it disappeared. Upon the second occasion as I was riding home upon my horse, accompanied by my groom, I saw the man for an instant only, on the borders of the old wood of Venne; he vanished amidst the trees. Last night as I was gazing from my window upon the moonlit grounds I saw him for the third time, by the side of the lake, staring in my direction; he was in the shadow, and thought I supposed, unnoticed. I went to call my maid but when we looked for him he had vanished."

"There seems perhaps very little in all this I know, my love," Marguerite continued, rising and placing her hands upon my shoulders, "but an unaccountable feeling of dread has taken possession of me and I cannot shake it off, try as I will.

"But," I urged, "perhaps you have been mis-

taken; possibly, dearest, you are unwell and your nerves are out of order; what reason can anyone have for behaving in this manner? Also, who would dare take the risk of injuring you, for although you will never admit it, there are at least four men who have asked for your hand; he would be a bold person indeed who would run the risk of making mortal enemies of some of the best swordsmen and most powerful nobles in Bremlauz.

"There can be no mistake," said Marguerite shaking her head, "had I seen this alarming figure once I might think it was an illusion, but I cannot have made a mistake on three separate occasions in as many different places."

"What struck me as very peculiar," she continued, "was the resemblance to yourself. The man's height appeared to be the same as your own, and his hat and cloak were the exact counterpart of yours, both the latter being as I observed in the daylight like them in colour."

This did not appear to me to be particularly remarkable, but I had occasion to remember it.

Marguerite, far from being possessed of a nervous temperament had a bright disposition; she was also highly accomplished and conversant with the writings of many of the greatest men that have lived, having a mind much above the miserable superstitions of the day. Her story was, however, almost incredible, as there seemed no obvious motive for the extraordinary behaviour of the individual who, as stated, had appeared to her.

As she ceased speaking there was a knock at

the door and a lackey entered saying that the general wished to converse with me when it was convenient.

The fellow retired with the information that I would follow in a few minutes.

"And have you not, dearest, communicated the fact that you have observed this individual to your guardian?" I queried.

"Yes," replied Marguerite, "but his cynical remarks about women's nerves and imagination upon the two first occasions annoyed me so much that I preferred to keep the third experience to myself."

My steward had begged for an appointment that night connected with some bad behaviour of his son; I therefore explained this to Marguerite, and took my leave of her, at the same time exhorting her to try and put the matter from her mind.

The general was seated in his study, a huge library filled with thousands of musty books. He rose as I entered, a tall dark-eyed muscular man, about fifty years of age, dressed in a light coloured coat and breeches and wearing the fashionable wig, to greet me, with an impressive countenance, and begged me to be seated.

"I am, as you know," he said after an instant's reflection, "a man of few words and like to come to the point at once; on the other hand I am not anxious to give offence. I say this in order that should you feel annoyed by the questions it is necessary for me to ask, you will, I trust, remember that I am dealing with a difficult subject in as

delicate a method as lies within my power."

His words were fair although his manner was objectionable.

"I would like to ask you," he continued, "if you have noticed any strangeness in the manner of my ward lately?"

"She has certainly been very much depressed," I answered.

"You have no reason for supposing that your attentions have not met with the same appreciation as formerly?" Von Graubler ventured, glancing keenly at me for a moment and then averting his eyes.

"None," I answered with some warmth.

"I have," he said, "a very unpleasant fact to communicate. As her guardian I am justified in taking precautions for the safety of her future welfare and feel that I cannot do better than make a confidant of the man to whom she is engaged to be married."

"Proceed, sir," I answered, observing him narrowly.

"This," he said, producing a soiled sheet of crumpled paper, "was picked up by Marguerite's groom, who stated that it fell from her pocket as she rode home ahead of him yesterday; she had already entered the chateau when the old fellow arrived, delayed by descending from his horse to pick up the note, and seeing me he requested that I would give the note to her. By chance my eye fell upon the writing, which was as follows:—

"'Can you meet me at the same place this evening, dearest?'

"Will you observe it for yourself," he continued, holding the missive towards me.

"I have no wish to see it," I said fiercely, "your man must have been drunk or mad; it is an affair of some village maiden probably; the note was possibly dropped by a girl who had previously passed along the road; the fellow's sight deceived him and he imagined he saw it fall."

"Village damsels cannot read, neither can their swains write as a rule," replied the general.

"However," I answered, rising and bowing, "the matter has no further interest for me. You are Marguerite's guardian and may of course adopt whatsoever measures to elucidate the affair you choose. In the meantime I will take my leave."

I had half intended to broach the subject of Marguerite's recountal of her strange experiences, but my love's relation of the reception the General gave to her own recital of them, and the anger which his imputations had aroused kept me silent: I believed that he had some reason for exciting my jealousy. I was determined, however, to make enquiries concerning my love's statements, and rode away from the Chateau of Maros very much perplexed indeed.

same title as myself, the third being a baron. Count Rudolph Kibzek was my dearest and firmest friend, a trifle eccentric, he had always shown himself to be the soul of honour, and his generosity was proverbial. He had frankly owned himself disappointed and vanquished in the wooing of Marguerite. It had however appeared to make no difference to our friendship, much to my delight, for his kindly nature, trained by the wars he had engaged in to firmness, coupled with good comradeship, was such that one valued its confidence. He was some ten years older than myself, although the rough life he had led gave him the appearance of being of a considerably greater age. He was fair, tall, athletic looking with light blue eyes.

Count Von Waldeau, like myself, stood slightly over six feet; he was forty years of age, very dark, and his brown eyes shone piercingly from out a swarthy strong countenance: the manner of the man was not aggressive, but something that emanated from his personality seemed to raise in the beholder a feeling of distrust. He had never made any reference to the failure of his love affairs; it was however easy to see that his feelings were far from being the same towards me as formerly. Nevertheless no open rupture had occurred and we remained, at least superficially as good friends as ever.

With regard to the third individual, Baron Von Meinter, who was twenty-seven years of age, he was a little over the average height, fair and with steel coloured eyes: he possessed considerable

dignity, and a quiet cynical disposition, almost approaching moroseness. I had been of course acquainted with him since childhood, but had never understood his nature and knew no more of his real character now that we had reached manhood than when we were boys together. Von Meinter like Von Waldeau had never mentioned the subject of Marguerite.

To my astonishment, I was informed upon reaching the castle that these three friends had all arrived soon after my departure in the morning, and remained impatiently awaiting my advent ever since. I hastened to the room for an explanation.

As I entered they arose.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I must apologise for my delay."

The firelight flashed upon the three handsome faces, which I noticed did not bear the expression one would have expected from men who were supposed to be looking forward to a convivial evening.

They deprecated my excuses almost simultaneously.

"But you will pardon my curiosity," I continued, "when I say that I am anxious to know why you have honoured me with so early a call to-day. I can only express my regret at my unavoidable absence."

They bowed. Rudolph's face wore a pained look, those of Von Waldeau and Von Meinter expressed furious and cynical anger. There was in the atmosphere of the room that strange and

unaccountable feeling of antagonism that one experiences before unpleasant communications are made. The very pictures of my ancestors which adorned the panelled oak walls seemed to frown down upon me.

From being astonished at the bearing of my friends I was becoming angry.

"Might I have a word with you alone?" questioned Von Waldeau.

"Certainly," I answered frigidly.

"You will pardon me, Count Von Waldeau," said Von Meinter, "I believe however I have the right of precedence, having arrived exactly seven minutes before you."

My curiosity grew; why was the order of arrival of such importance?

"Will you kindly accompany me, Baron Von Meinter," I said.

As we entered a small anteroom I turned to find that odd cynical glance, charged with malevolence, fixed upon me.

"Count," I said, "something appears to amuse you."

"It does partly," he replied. "I derive entertainment of a certain kind from all things, but in this case disgust predominates over everything else."

"Might I ask you for some explanation," I said angrily, "one can hardly consider a fixed grin sufficient cause for a quarrel. If you desire such I must at least ask for adequate grounds."

"Surely," was the reply, "your answer exists in the recollection of your own perfidiousness."

I struggled with my rising wrath, determined to at least know the reason for Von Meinter's viciousness.

"And if I tell you that my memory is devoid of anything which excuses you for this unseemly behaviour?"

"I shall reply that you are not only a scoundrel but a coward also. I at least did you the honour of believing that you were a brave man if a dishonourable one."

"And I upon my part thought you were possessed of ordinary intelligence, and of those emotions which distinguish man from the lower animals."

"To which emotions do you refer in particular?"

"Chiefly that of justice," I answered.

His bitter laugh was that of a man who is completely convinced and believes an attempt is being made to persuade him against what he recognises as a positive fact.

"Might I ask you a question?" he cried.

"Certainly."

"Why then is it necessary for you to visit the Countess Linzorf at the chateau grounds in the middle of the night when her guardian admits you at the ordinary hours."

For a moment amazement held me speechless, then I answered, "Count Von Meinter, the reasons for an engagement are sufficient. Will to-morrow in the Lindenberg Glade suit you?"

"It will; and the hour?"

"Nine o'clock."

Without another word he bowed and left me, quitting the Castle.

Astonished beyond measure, I returned to my other two friends.

Von Waldeau advanced from the fireplace at which he had been sitting with Rudolph, and in a few moments was facing me in his turn in the anteroom.

"You wish to speak to me," I said.

"To speak!" he echoed with a harsh laugh; then his brows contracted and a long, deep dark, depression appeared in his forehead just above the nose; the man trembled from head to foot with ungovernable rage, turned first white, then red; his eyes blazed, and stepping forward he attempted to strike me upon the cheek.

I recoiled, half drawing my sword, then remembering that I was in my own house, pushed it back again into its scabbard and demanded an explanation.

"Hound!" he blurted forth, "is it not sufficient that you win the love of the sweetest and most beautiful woman in Austria from your betters, must I not only lose her but be further tortured by tales of dishonour? Speak, man, or——"

"To such a question I have one tongue only which will reply, and that a steel one. Von Meinter has unfortunately a prior claim upon me at the Lindenberg Glade to-morrow at nine o'clock; after that you may command me, should success be mine," I answered.

"Until then, Count Arndt," hoarsely murmured Von Waldeau, with an evil scowl, "farewell."

He strode from the room and down the corridor towards the hall; a few moments later the great door closed with a crash behind him.

Had the insult been anything but the one it was, or my former friends allowed me the right of trial and explanation given to the worst criminals, my mad rage might have had some curb; as it was they had not only attacked my honour in its weakest point, but apparently readily accepted statements made against me and assumed immediately that I must of necessity be guilty. There seemed to me to be at least something due to a reputation hitherto untarnished.

There yet remained Rudolph, at least he was my trusted friend. I would seek some explanation from him.

I returned to the dining room in which he now stood with his face to the fire. As I entered he turned and raised his eyes. My spirits fell; there was something in his icy glance that told me unmistakably my old companion was perhaps the bitterest enemy of all.

"Rudolph," I said, "in the name of our old friendship, I demand some reasonable explanation of your manner."

"You play with me," he muttered; whilst I observed that he kept his hand with difficulty from the hilt of his sword.

"I swear to you," I answered, "that I am totally ignorant of any cause of annoyance to our friends or yourself, at least do not condemn me before even framing a charge.

"Adrian," said Rudolph, his face alight with emotions that I had never observed upon his kindly countenance before, "I was not aware that my old comrade possessed such histrionic talent. The charge I have is too grievous to mention; it concerns the woman I loved."

"Enough," I shouted, "Von Meinter and Von Waldeau will be at the Lindenberg Glade at nine o'clock to-morrow morning: may I hope that you will do me the favour also of taking the chance of a turn with me?"

"More, Count Arndt, it is necessary that only one of us two shall leave the wood alive."

"There is one thing," I said, "you will be good enough to inform me I trust."

"And that is?"

"Is your quarrel the same as that of Von Waldeau and Von Meinter?"

"Believe me, I do not know, I am not acquainted with their affairs with reference to the present situation." So saying, he in his turn left me.

I had felt that it would be useless after what had passed for me to mention that Marguerite had told me that she had seen a masked man resembling myself; it sounded too much like a fabrication, for who would believe that a man would dress himself in clothes similar to mine and then put on a mask. I had already been practically called a liar, and shrank from drawing forth an accusation including the woman I loved.

I advanced to the window which commanded the the approach road to the castle, and gazing out

listened to the sound of the horses' feet dying away in the distance, pondering upon the remarkable events of the day, and wondering who this mysterious stranger could be that had appeared three times to Marguerite, and by what possible process of reasoning my friends could have connected this man and myself, if they had done so. I remembered that my love had said he bore a resemblance to me, but why should they be so sure of their position. That they one and all believed me guilty of a great crime was apparent, but had the affair any reference to the masked man seen by Marguerite? What connection had the note supposed to have fallen from the Countess' pocket with the matter? Had it any? Why did the guardian who appeared to hate me ask my advice?

I decided to write a note addressed to the three men stating the true circumstances, with explicit instructions upon the outside that it was to be opened by any one of them in the event of my death, and begging them to act as they might think best. My pride would stoop to nothing more.

This done, I brooded long over the riddle, and retired to my bed at a late hour, where I dreamt strange and horrible things, but nothing so terrible as the future held in store for me.

On Saturday a glorious day dawned. Was I destined, I wondered, never to see another sunrise? I was no ordinary swordsman, but my adversaries were excellent fencers, more especially Von Waldeau, who unfortunately would have to be met after I had encountered Von Meinter; the latter

was the least skilful but would necessarily, even if conquered, fatigue me. I had however right on my side, and was determined to do my utmost to teach these rash calumniators the lesson I considered they deserved. My rage was great, but chiefly was I incensed against my old friend Rudolph.

How little I guessed in my youthful impetuosity the horrible nightmare of events I was about to witness.

The rendezvous was a patch of perfectly level ground situated in the wood of Lindenberg, a sort of glade. It will be necessary, in order that the ensuing events may be followed with greater clearness, to describe the exact situation of this place with relation to the positions of the various castles and mansions close to it.

At a point on the main road from Bremlauz, about ten miles from the Capital, a path named the Aar Road turned to the right and to the North; this led to the castles belonging to Von Waldeau and Rudolph, three and five miles respectively from the junction. Two miles farther along the main road the Herlarz Road turned northwards; one mile from this junction, and on the latter road, a path two miles long went to the right leading to the Chateau of Maros, the property of Marguerite's guardian. At the third milepost of the Herlarz Road my own path, one mile in length, turned to the left. Von Meinter's abode, after which the road had been named, was at the extreme end of it, some five miles from the junction with that from the Capital.

Opposite the Herlarz junction, on the south side of the main road upon the crest of a hill, stood the deserted and half ruined Chateau of Dannerg, which was owned by the descendant of an eccentric and wealthy gentleman of the North of Austria, who for some reason had decided to reside for a portion of the year in the South; there was no land however attached to the mansion and the present owner having no interest in this part of the empire had allowed the place to fall into a state of decay.

The rendezvous was situated on the North side of the main road, midway between the Aar and Herlarz junctions; it was a level grassy spot surrounded by magnificent trees.

In a little over half an hour my horse brought me to the place; I was determined that my opponents should not be kept waiting and had reached the rendezvous a quarter of an hour before time. To my very great astonishment at nine o'clock no one had appeared. I blamed my watch, which had however never failed me before; but when half past nine and ten o'clock arrived without a sign of my opponents, I was almost persuaded that there had been some mistake. I thought over the conversations however and was positive that the arrangements were for nine.

At eleven o'clock, more mystified than angry, I decided to return. That Rudolph and Von Waldeau might be delayed by some common cause I could understand, but Von Meinter lived in the opposite direction, and unless arrangements had been made last night, which seemed absurd to suppose, I could

conceive of no reason that would account for the non-appearance of the three.

Revolving the situation in my mind, I approached the junction with the Herlarz Road and was about to turn into the latter, when to my astonishment I heard from amidst the trees on the opposite side of the road the voice of Von Meinter shout, "Von Waldeau!"

At this point there were two roads running towards the South and passing on either side of the ruined chateau. I trotted my horse up the one leading to the left. At a bend of the road I came suddenly upon a group of masked men who levelled their pistols at me and demanded instant surrender: two of them seized my bridal; unprepared as I was, resistance was worse than useless.

"We will take care of your sword and pistols," said the leader.

"What villainy is this?" I shouted, "and where is Baron Von Meinter?"

"We unfortunately have not the honour of that gentleman's acquaintanceship, neither do we seek it," said the man who spoke before; "the ladies who employed us merely asked for you, and, courteous and obedient as ever, we seek but to obey their commands, no more and no less."

I regarded the man with astonishment.

"Ladies!" I ejaculated.

"Ladies, sir," he responded, "but allow me to suggest that you curb your impatience, your curiosity will shortly be appeased. Will you kindly

dismount and we will take you by the footpath which leads to Dannerg."

"Forward, men!" he shouted, when I had descended; and we proceeded in the direction of the ruined chateau, my horse being led along the riding road; nor could I obtain any reply to my proposals to search for Von Meinter.

CHAPTER III

MY TERRIBLE HOSTESS

The road along which my captors led me had for its ultimate destination the town of Munden; it formed a junction with that which ran round the other side of the chateau, at Vaschauz, a village twenty-five miles away, the object being to connect two separate series of villages with the first mentioned place.

I wondered if the deserted building which we were now rapidly approaching had become a den of robbers; that idea however seemed to be absurd taking into consideration the closeness of the chateau to Bremlauz and the number of powerful landowners in the neighbourhood.

The recollection too of the voice of Von Meinter puzzled me. Why had he shouted the name of Von Waldeau? Had he really been calling upon our former mutual friend or was it a means of warning me against him? There was an accent of terror in the shout that suggested to me either fear of or for the person named. The result of the shout had been my capture on the road to the chateau, for had nothing occurred, I should have proceeded along that leading to my own castle and would have avoided the men. On the other hand they might have stationed themselves on my own road with an

almost equal chance of success; there would of course have been a greater possibility of interruption or rescue in the latter case. However, this affair of Von Meinter puzzled me as much as all the other mysterious events of the last few days.

Occasionally we caught a glimpse of the weather beaten and decayed looking chateau poised above us, the gloomy outlines of which were rendered doubly sinister by my desperate condition.

A last sharp climb brought us to the building; the dark massive front and ruined turrets, coupled with the company of my mysterious assailants, added to the fear which was beginning to take possession of me.

I was hurried rapidly across the broken flags, through the main entrance into a spacious hall, from thence by wide stone steps to a huge square dismal room with stone floors and walls, the latter being studded here and there on one side with small embrasures which answered the purpose of windows.

The builder had adopted a curious style, making the place half castle and half mansion. Above, mighty beams supported an upper floor. Six large chairs and an enormous table at one end were all the furniture the room contained.

My companions, who had not since my capture spoken a word either to me or amongst themselves, proceeded to bind and gag me; then, with the exception of one individual, left the room. This fellow crossed his arms and proceeded to study the embrasures. The taciturnity of the man's

nature was so apparent from his gestures and set mouth which appeared below the mask, that I made no attempt at conversation, and again tried to think out some possible explanation of the situation. The gagging added a fresh complication. What was the object of it? What had my enemies to fear from my shouts? The road was a long way off.

Presently, to my surprise, two of the men appeared still masked and proceeded to spread a table for a sumptuous meal. A snowy cloth, several candles, which the darkness of the room, caused by the inefficient arrangements for lighting, together with the clouding over of the sky rendered necessary, made that end of the apartment look quite brilliant; whilst the prospects of a good meal revived my spirits, although I wondered how the difficulty of my gag was to be surmounted.

After a long half hour of waiting four women, masked and dressed superbly in black, entered by the door in the corner behind the table; the light from the candles flashed upon the jewels in their hair and dresses and the dazzling whiteness of their necks and bosoms.

One of them advanced and addressed me.

"Colonel Von Heiner," she said, "it will give us great pleasure if you will share our meal."

There was a mistake then. The situation seemed so very novel however that I began to enjoy it and felt inclined to do nothing to enlighten my fair captors. However I thought better of it and shook my head to signify that I was not Von

Heiner. I knew this man, a colonel of the Austrian Empire, by reputation, but had never seen him.

"Of course," said the spokeswoman, "you will not object to having your meals under the same conditions as the Marquis de Ravanne?"

I had never been acquainted with this French gentleman, who had been killed to the best of my recollection in connection with some love affair in Paris, and again shook my head.

The women again laughed quietly and it seemed to me somewhat maliciously.

I was seated with my arms still bound behind me, and gagged, at the end of the table farthest from the door at which the women had entered; they sat opposite each other, two upon either side of the table. Was I to merely watch them eat? Under what circumstances had the marquis had his meal?

The food appeared to be excellent, and the wines, to judge from the cobwebbed bottles from which they were poured, beyond reproach; the ladies were delightfully entertaining, jokes were bandied and tales told concerning personages with whom I was supposed to be acquainted, which absolutely filled me with merriment, made me forget my strange plight and still further roused my curiosity to know who these mysterious entertainers were, why they carried out their conversation in such low tones and why above all I was kept gagged and merely allowed to watch them eat. The magnificent chin of the woman

who first addressed me, I had surely seen before, but I recognised nothing in the appearances or manners of the other three.

The strangeness of the whole scene at last so affected me, that I began to wonder if I were really awake. I might perhaps, if there had been only one woman present, have come to the conclusion that I had made a conquest of some romantic dame who had chosen an exceptionally unique method of expressing her passion; but this could certainly not be the case where four were concerned.

I was far from sorry when the meal, which was a short one and that after all I could see merely heralded something more important, was over, and the dishes were cleared rapidly away by the servitors.

I was then moved to the centre of the room; four chairs were placed in a semicircle in front of me and three of the women seated themselves. Behind the chairs stood the servitors. Several of the candlesticks were placed upon the floor on either side of the group and shed light over the small circle, leaving the remaining portion of the room in comparative gloom.

The woman possessing the well moulded chin remained standing and spoke saying, "Colonel Von Heiner, you have been the scourge of our society, no woman has been safe from your insults and most of us have dreaded to resent them, fearing that it would mean the loss of some dear one. Numbers of gallant men have perished at your hands, as assuredly murdered as though they

had been tied and their skulls cleft. Finding that man is incapable of ridding us of the pest, woman has decided to do what he cannot, as has many times happened before in the history of the world. It is true we might have arranged to take our revenge in a simpler and less ostentatious manner, but you must remember that in addition to our desire to deliver society from you, we each have our own private vengeance to satisfy, and it will I am sure be needless to quote proverbs and instances to you showing to what excesses woman will go in her desire to gratify her hate. We felt that to take a meal with you this evening under similar circumstances to those experienced by the poor Marquis de Ravanne and gloat upon your misery as you reflected upon the swift dark death impending, would in some measure repay us for the pangs your murderous hands have caused. So far you have well concealed the terror this recollection must bring to you: you are a courageous man, Colonel, but wait."

I shuddered and glanced from mask to mask, but the flashing eyes stared pitilessly. I had been in dangerous positions before, but there was something in the present situation that appalled me.

"It has been decided," continued the woman, "that you shall this night fight a duel under the conditions which your opponents have almost always fought. Your antagonist was chosen by lot; I was selected by fate; it is with me therefore that you will fight to-night. We shall endeavour throughout to play upon those emotions

in your breast which you have so often stirred in the hearts of others, in order that you shall have every opportunity of judging the torments you have caused. You shall know the sensations that those feel who suffer insult and are powerless to resent it, who die leaving wrongs unavenged."

I seemed about to awaken from a hideous nightmare, the ill-lit stone chamber, the marble-like skins of my beautiful but fearsome women companions, the motionless, stern figures of the servitors behind in the shade, were they, could they be real?

But within the moment I was more than satisfied upon the point. One of the sitting women rose, advanced and saying, "Colonel, you are a liar, a scoundrel and a murderer," raised her hand and struck me a buffet on the cheek.

I attempted to rise, but was flung back into the chair by one of the men. A low sound of malicious laughter greeted my discomfiture. Repeating the same words each of the other two sitting women in turn rose and struck me upon the face.

Notwithstanding my misery I could not help noticing how extremely careful everyone appeared to be that there should be as little noise as possible: what could be the reason for this and the gagging?

"And now, Colonel, comes my turn," so saying and seizing a glass of wine which had been purposely left upon the table, the spokeswoman hurled the contents first and the glass afterwards full in my face.

These insults," she continued, "having been

borne by you, it becomes you to avenge them as a gentleman should. Unfortunately, we cannot give you choice of weapons, in fact if you reflect it will be apparent that the conditions necessitate you being deprived of them entirely, thus I feel assured you will deem it needless for us to free your arms."

Replying to the look of questioning horror in my eyes, she said, "I intend fighting you, Colonel, on the same terms which your superior skill allowed our husbands and brothers."

Taking my sword, which was presented to her by one of the men, from its sheath, she placed the point against my breast.

I may be forgiven if I say I trembled in every limb. Ten times had the face of death appeared to me, but I had always been able to defend myself, to take some action. There was however something in this fearful situation calculated to appal the boldest, the feeling that a few words would save me, rendered my agony the more unendurable.

"I give you five minutes, Colonel, to reflect upon your position," continued the implacable creature; "you will remember to the end that there remain several insults unpunished, without the remotest chance of your obtaining vengeance upon this side of the grave. I am not accustomed to the use of the sword it is true, but I fancy that if my whole weight is thrown upon this weapon, I can be sure of your favourite point—the heart—and make death a certainty."

"William," she said, looking at her watch and

turning to one of the men, "drop the white cloth at the hour."

A silence fell upon the group. I glanced again at the horror standing over me, then at the rest of the determined little assemblage, but could see no hope of mercy. The point of the sword rested on my breast. Without the wind sighed dolefully: I could hear the rustling of the leaves and the sound of swaying boughs. I thought I could count the seconds and starting reached ninety, but my mind returned to thoughts of sweet Marguerite and I wondered if she would ever know how I met my fate. Then the mystery, the ever increasing, intangible mystery, which this strange affair had broken in upon, at least it had reached its limit for me, just perhaps as my help was needed. But then the voice of Von Meinter, was there any connection? I returned with a start to the present. How many seconds had gone? Bah! it was useless.

Again, could I do nothing? Excitement and the bonds had weakened me so much that the slightest effort was impossible. Surely, I thought, women could not do such a terrible deed; but the scene before me and the recollection of the hatred expressed by word and blow destroyed the hope. If only I had one chance, it was hard to die in this manner.

Surely the time of grace had expired; there was no hope, the white cloth must—Ha! there were voices below, loud exclamations, the sound of footsteps. I was surely saved. How many

seconds were left? I glanced enquiringly at the woman above me, haggard hope must have been depicted on every lineament.

"Yes, on my honour," she murmured, "I do not strike before the hour."

There was a rush of feet on the steps outside, the door was flung open and a masked man entered.

"Madame! Madame!" he said excitedly, but subduing his voice as she impatiently raised a warning hand, "there is a terrible mistake, this is not Colonel Von Heiner; my brother Joseph has just arrived and he swears that the Colonel did not intend to start from Bremlauz for at least an hour after Joseph set out. He received the information from a most trustworthy source and has ridden out at a great pace, having been overtaken by no one."

"Did your brother see the Colonel when in Bremlauz?" questioned the woman.

"No, Madame," replied the man.

She turned to me saying, "Have we made a mistake?"

I nodded assent. A strange faint sensation swept over me, but I conquered it with a mighty effort.

CHAPTER IV

A WAYSIDE CHALLENGE

"Then who can it be?" said the women in chorus.

A silence fell upon the group. I was so utterly dazed for the moment as to be incapacitated from thinking at all. The masked figures standing in wondering indecision, the rotting tapestry, which had in many places fallen, exposing the bare walls, swaying in the draught occasioned by the opening of the door, the loud breathing of the man who had not yet recovered from his sudden rush up the stairs and subsequent verbal torrent, all come back to me now as I write.

"Sir," said the spokeswoman, "if we ungag you will you swear upon your honour not to raise your voice or call for help under any circumstances."

I nodded assent.

The gag was removed.

"And now," continued the woman, "we have to apologise for our treatment of you, Sir, but may we ask your name?"

"I am, Madame," I answered, "Count Adrian of Arndt."

The women whispered together.

"Yes," said their spokeswoman, "I fear, Count Adrian, that the difficulty is not yet settled. You are acquainted with both our plans for killing the

colonel and the reason for so doing; unless we receive a further oath on your honour that you will never reveal the cause of his death, I fear it will be necessary for you to share his fate: our vengeance cannot be baulked, neither can we risk our lives.

"Madame," I replied, "I am neither an assassin, nor the accomplice of such; let me assure you that if you release me before the colonel's death I shall warn him, if after, the authorities will be informed."

The women again conferred.

"We have a further proposal," continued the spokeswoman after an interval. "Do you object to fight a duel to the death with the colonel? The alternative must be death. Not a word must be said to him about your experiences here. We require your oath on the point."

"If he is the scoundrel he appears to be, it will give me the greatest pleasure to save my life under those conditions," I replied. "I swear to tell him nothing."

"But the noise, Madame! the noise!" said one of the men.

"That can be easily arranged," I said.

"How?" exclaimed the woman.

"The colonel is not due for about an hour."

"Well?"

"I will ride to the wood of Lindenberg and intercept him."

"But once released, can we trust you?" said the spokeswoman.

"Madame, you have the word of Count Adrian of Arndt."

"Where will you fight?"

"There is a spot close to the road."

"Very well, Count," the colonel is a good swordsman; but your reputation is at least equal to his: we leave the matter in your hands."

"And in the event of my losing the day, the colonel goes free?" I enquired.

"We make no such promise," said the woman.

"Then I fear that our bargain cannot stand good," I answered.

The matter was again discussed by the mysterious four and my demands were at last reluctantly acceded to.

"I have one favour to ask," I said, as my bonds were being cut. "May I enquire if a gentleman named Baron von Meinter is known to you and if it was his voice I heard in the road when captured?"

"I am not acquainted with the baron," said the spokeswoman. "Of course I cannot say whether you heard his voice; one is naturally not familiar with the movements of unknown people." This was uttered with some asperity.

"Then I take your leave, ladies," I remarked, bowing. "May I ask though what steps you will take to become acquainted with the result of the engagement?"

"What do you suggest?" said the spokeswoman, as my weapons were being handed to me.

"Let one of your men station himself at the cross roads at which I was captured. In the event

of my success the exact result shall be communicated; should I fail my absence will be understood."

Within a few moments I was in the saddle and riding towards the main road, my mind dazed with the complications of the situation. Somehow I did not believe the woman when she anwsered my question about Von Meinter; it seemed however only reasonable to suppose she spoke the truth, otherwise how could her mistake be accounted for? There could surely be no connection between it and the non-appearance of my challengers of the night before. Above all why had silence been so imperative?

My head swam with the effects of my speculations, and I resolved to cease theorising until I had ascertained whether the colonel would appear or not.

At the end of three quarters of an hour, the sound of a horse cantering in the distance broke the silence. I watched with impatience the bend of the road in the direction of Bremlauz round which the rider must first appear. I had a great curiosity to see this murderous colonel.

The man that did appear by no means answered the description my imagination had pictured. As I had been mistaken for him I expected a tall dark man, but to my surprise the individual upon the horse appeared to be about the average height and very fair. He did not seem weighed down by the thoughts of atrocious deeds committed, but on the other hand trolled forth the burden of a cheerful drinking song. So occupied was he also with

pleasant day dreams that he was almost upon me before being aware of the fact that I barred his way and drew rein with a merry exclamation.

"By the flash of a sabre, Sir!" he shouted, "I appear to have been dreaming, but you have the advantage of me, for you are sleeping soundly in the middle of the road."

"On the contrary, I trust I shall prove to be the more awake of the two," I replied. "I have the honour of addressing, I believe, Colonel von Heiner?"

"You have, Sir, and to whom am I indebted for this courtesy?"

"I am the Count Adrian of Arndt, at your service."

"And your business?"

"You have insolent acquaintances, Sir!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and as I can obtain no satisfaction from them it is necessary that it should come from you."

"By all means, by all means, good Sir; moreover I lost at the table last night three times as much as I could afford and my hosts were too polite to allow me any means of allaying my irritation. Also, dear Count, I can promise you a most interesting experience, as finding my arm and eye in need of a tonic, I have refreshed myself quite recently with lessons from Alonzo, Rubelli, and Engezzler, the three fencing masters of Vienna, as you are of course aware. To which however of my numerous acquaintances am I indebted for this fortunate meeting?"

"Unhappily my memory fails me, Colonel."

"Ha!" he exclaimed with a fierce look, "it is sufficient that it has served me to the extent of bringing you here. Curiously enough my business was with you."

"Your business with me?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied, "but it is now of no consequence. I presume you have a quieter spot than the centre of the road for the adjustment of your grievances."

"As you will," I responded, wondering. "Yes, there is a glade a short distance within this wood."

We both descended and led our horses to the shady rendezvous at which I had waited already so many hours in the morning.

As the colonel finished tethering his animal, he fell into a reverie from which he awoke with a start and addressed me.

"Count Adrian," he said, "of all things I am curious."

"You will pardon me," I answered, "but of what use to me is a knowledge of your character at the present juncture; should fortune smile on you I shall undoubtedly forget it almost as soon as learnt, should you be unsuccessful in this venture why then all recollections of your characteristics save that of courage will cease to interest me."

"I was not aware this affair was to be to the death. Nevertheless I have obliged you willingly, but am consumed with a desire to know more concerning those friends of mine to whom I owe this fortunate introduction."

"I must once more remind you, Colonel, that I am deficient in that excellent quality, memory."

My adversary shrugged his shoulders.

"I have one small request to make which I trust you will not refuse me," he said. "In my coat there is a letter, might I ask as a favour that in certain circumstances it shall be sent to the person to whom it is addressed?"

"I will guarantee the safe delivery if it is possible," I answered, "more especially as I was about to make a similar request to you."

"You have my word also, Count. And now on guard," he said.

Our swords crossed.

"Hold!"

The shout came from amongst the trees in the direction of the road. We both turned to behold the leader of the men who had captured me.

"Count," he said, advancing, "I come at an inconvenient moment, yet if I refrained from speaking I should be disobeying my orders."

"Proceed," I replied angrily.

"May I beg that you will speak to a lady for one minute," he said.

Annoyed and astonished beyond measure at this interruption I said,

"Colonel, may I ask you to excuse me?"

"I am entirely at your service, my dear Count," he answered.

I followed the man amongst the trees and found myself in the presence of the masked woman who had acted as spokeswoman at the chateau.

"Count," she said in a hoarse voice, "do you love the Countess Linzorf?"

I stared at the woman, astounded.

"Do you wish to know why your three adversaries did not appear this morning?"

"Madame," I answered, "there is nothing that I desire more than the solution of this incomprehensible mystery."

"Then this duel must not continue."

"Not continue?"

"Yes, you must find some good reason for stopping it."

"But it was arranged by your express commands."

"True; but I have since received advice which renders my desire to avenge myself upon this man subservient to greater necessity."

"And this necessity?"

"Is that you proceed without delay to the Chateau of Waltzen, which is as you are aware, I presume, a very old mansion recently abandoned by the Bearnerg family for their modern Chateau at Bonitz."

Waltzen was situated half a mile from the main road and four from Bremlauz.

"For what purpose may I enquire, Madame?"

"Directly to rescue a person of importance and indirectly to enable you to obtain a solution of the mystery of your friends' behaviour, which involves the more serious problem of the countess' danger."

I glanced at the mask and thought how easy it would be to make a dash over the short distance

that separated us and snatch it from the woman's face; but she read my thoughts and signed to her companion who had drawn his pistol and held it ready to cover me.

"The rest of my men are within hail," she said; "but why do I mention this? I trust to your courtesy, also to your generosity, to forgive the error at the chateau."

"And the colonel," I queried, "should he agree to a postponement?"

"Shall be allowed to go free; yet stay, can you not force him to accompany you?"

"Force him, Madame! I might if the combat had proceeded have had the better fortune of the two but to compel such a man—"

"Of course, Count, I did not necessarily imply physical force; is there no strategy that can be thought of to induce this valuable sword to accompany you as a friend? for you may need a strong arm."

"I have a solution," I replied, "there are two things required, a proof of the genuineness of my appeal to him to forego the duel and his services, we will give him the one by means of attaining the other; at least the offer can be made, there appears no other possible method. Judging from what I have seen if the colonel is not engaged he will be only too happy to agree to my proposals. But I require a few minutes to reflect upon the situation."

CHAPTER V

THE ABANDONED CHATEAU

Again my brain reeled. Yet another complication was added to the tangled web. Why had the woman suddenly resolved to allow the colonel to go free? What passion could be superior to her desire for revenge on this man? I wondered if I risked anything by going and realised that this could not be so, for if my death had been necessary for the accomplishment of any plans of hers she might easily have arranged it. Also she might have allowed the colonel the chance of killing me.

"Madame," I said, "I will do as you wish if possible. What are your further instructions?"

"You must proceed to the house named, where a person will be found imprisoned in one of the back rooms facing the forest. This individual must be liberated. You must be quick; any delay may be fatal."

"And what is the name of the prisoner?" I asked.

"That is quite unnecessary. Remember not a word of your adventures to the colonel."

I bowed and returned to my waiting adversary.

"Sir," said I, "at the request of one lady and in order that I may serve another lady very dear to me, I have to beg that you will allow a postpone-

ment of this affair. I can assure you that my present position causes me the deepest humiliation. When my mission is accomplished I shall be happy to present myself to you wherever your business has chanced to call you."

"Count," said my opponent, "I stand in the presence of a truly courageous person; to fight is a little thing, but when a brave man as I know you are risks the accusation of cowardice for the sake of duty I cannot but sympathise with him, and as proof thereof I offer you my services unconditionally in any affair whatsoever for the period of one month, which is the duration of my leave."

I grasped the hand of the soldier, and as I gazed into his merry blue eyes almost began to discredit the tales I had heard about him. But there was no time for delay it appeared.

"I accept your offer, Colonel," I cried. "In fact I was about to ask from you as a favour what you gave so freely; and now we will make a start."

I looked around but could see no traces of the mysterious man and woman who had doubtless overheard our conversation or judged from our actions that a satisfactory termination to the affair had been arrived at.

"Is this matter," the Colonel said as we led our animals towards the road, "going to take us towards or from Bremlauz?"

"I have instructions to proceed to the Chateau Waltzen, which is about four and a half miles from the capital, and release some individual who is imprisoned there," I answered.

"And you have no further information on the subject?"

"None whatsoever, beyond the fact that I seem or perhaps I may say my fiancée appears to be the focus of some curious mystery."

"And do you hope for a solution to-night?"

"I have been informed that what occurs this evening will explain certain events embracing our affairs."

"You will pardon my referring again to a statement made by you," I said, as we mounted our horses, "you stated, I believe, that your business was with me?"

He turned and regarded me with a curious smile for a moment, then with an impatient movement answered, "As regards enigmas, Count, we are quits."

We galloped forward in silence.

Night had fallen before we reached the entrance to the chateau grounds. After a short ride we entered a magnificent avenue at the end of which in the light of the moon stood the mansion.

We tethered the horses and proceeded to look for an entrance. This was soon found, for the locks had apparently been removed by the owners before leaving the building, which was in a very dilapidated condition and had not been abandoned before it was time.

The house was quite destitute of furniture and our footsteps sounded hollow as we groped in the passages and swords in hand wandered from room to room, the only light being that from the moon.

There was nothing to be seen on the ground floor; all the doors were wide open and without locks. We ascended to the first floor. The doors of the apartments, on the front side of the house, leading to the main corridor were all open, as also were those of the back portion save one, this was closed and bolted from the outside.

A faint line of light appeared at the bottom of this door.

The colonel and I looked at each other, unable to disguise our excitement. We both felt ourselves to be upon the brink of some strange discovery.

I shot the bolt and flung the door violently open, prepared for anything.

The room was well lit, but not a sound issued therefrom.

We paused and exchanged glances, each seeking to divine the thoughts and wishes of the other as to the best plan of action. Something obstructed our view through the crack of the door.

"Let us enter, but be cautious," muttered the colonel. I sprang into the room followed by my friend. We found ourselves face to face with the Archduke Frederick of Bremlauz. He was a tall dark man of forty-five years of age, robust and vigorous looking, and stood with folded arms against the empty fireplace glaring fiercely at us.

I was absolutely stupefied.

It was the voice of His Highness that recalled us to our senses.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "you have not received the desired signal. My answer is as I

said it would be, the same; but you appear to have grown bolder and have at least prepared a surprise for me, for if there was one man in Austria that I should not have suspected of treason it would have been the Count of Arndt."

At this moment a strange muffled noise came from the outside of the house. I glanced towards the windows; they were shuttered and barred, the arrangements being such that the woodwork could not be opened from within unless with special implements.

At the same instant the notes of a bugle rang out, then there were footsteps on the stairs.

The colonel and I looked towards the Archduke; his face wore a sardonic smile.

I felt that both my friend and myself stood in grave peril.

"Sire," I said, "believe me, there is some mistake."

"I am beginning to think so too," replied the Archduke, "you will be able to give your explanation however to the Captain of the Guard, for if I err not that is his voice we hear."

It was so, and at that moment a tall athletic looking young man of about thirty years of age, dressed in the uniform of an officer of the Guards, his eyes sparkling with excitement, dashed into the room followed by a dozen troopers.

"Sire," said he, "what is this?"

"Ask these gentlemen," replied the Archduke.

Von Rootzen bowed towards us, his face expressing intense astonishment.

The colonel and I sheathed our swords.

"You hesitate, gentlemen," said His Highness; "surely you do not find the matter so difficult."

My companion gazed at me enquiringly.

"I think perhaps, Your Highness," I said, "what I have to say is better reserved for your private ear."

"On the contrary my experiences of your private conversations are far from satisfactory; the time has passed for them I am thankful to say."

"Believe me, Your Highness," I replied, "we came to rescue you."

"After having kidnapped me, my good Count Adrian, this morning in the wood of Moultenne and made certain proposals the alternative of which was death."

"I assure you, Sire, that being warned by a lady of your peril this gentleman and myself rode instantly to the rescue. If there has been treason we at least are not the perpetrators."

"And what is this lady's name?"

"She was masked, Sire."

The Archduke's face assumed a furious aspect; his brown eyes flashed lightning.

"A likely tale," said he. "Listen," he continued, turning to Von Rootzen; "this morning, probably by arrangement, I was allowed to draw ahead of the hunting party and ultimately became isolated. Suddenly from amid the trees, this man and two companions appeared and presenting pistols at my head demanded instant surrender. I had no choice but to obey and was instantly led to this chateau,

then some four miles distant, by out-of-the-way paths, and threatened with death if I attempted to attract attention.

"Having arrived here certain demands were made which I rejected. I was given a limited period to consider the proposals and my final answer was demanded before a fixed time.

"A few minutes before you entered, these traitors appeared, seemingly to prosecute their demands; the arch-villain himself, whom I recognise by his height, sword, cloak and hat, now has the audacity to say that he came here to rescue me, warned by a certain mysterious masked woman. I ask if you have ever heard of such consummate insolence?"

The Captain of the Guard looked uncomfortable.

"Your Highness omits to recognise one important point," I said. "Why should we appear now unmasked? If it was necessary for the culprits to disguise themselves this morning, surely it would be requisite now; the conditions are the same it appears to me."

"You forgot to mention, Sir," His Highness replied sternly, "that the penalty of my non-compliance with your infamous proposals was death, and that as I had not given you the necessary signal before five o'clock, of knocking upon the floor to signify my agreement, your advent had an object which rendered concealment no longer necessary. namely my assassination."

I hoped that even if I had been the victim of a plot or misadventure at least the archduke would know something about my friends, and seeing that

there was some truth in what I said, might be induced to give a private hearing to my story.

I therefore said, "The masked woman, Sire, informed me that I would obtain intelligence concerning three of my friends and certain annoyance to which a lady of my acquaintanceship is being subjected. May I ask if you have any knowledge of facts dealing with such a situation?"

I mentioned no names, not wishing to make public my affairs and knowing that if the archduke had heard of the mystery he would at once guess what was alluded to.

"I have not," he said fiercely, "and your question is the fitting companion to your absurd story.

After this to tell my experiences would be useless. Who would believe them? Also this involved giving information, as I could not obtain the private ear of His Highness, to the colonel, which I had sworn he should not have. I determined to reserve my defence.

My friend looked at me askance.

"You appear to be uneasy, Sir," said the Archduke to him.

"The colonel's face again became illuminated by his cheerful smile.

"Sire," he answered, "will you allow me to tell you my part of the story? for I can swear that you saw neither my head, hat, nor cloak here this morning and he proceeded to relate his adventure with me.

"Notwithstanding that, I threw in my lot with the count," he said. "I have not hesitated to relate this, as if he has acted the traitor I

did not bargain to become an accomplice in treason; if he is an honourable man, what I have stated should help to clear him from suspicion."

"According to your story, Sir, said the Archduke, "you are Colonel Von Heiner of the Imperial Service, may I ask what you are doing in my dominions?"

"I am merely bent upon pleasure, Your Highness; I was anxious to see Bremlauz and was as a matter of fact on the way to call upon the Count of Arndt when we met."

"I cannot swear to your being one of my aggressors of the morning," replied the Archduke, "but I can certainly answer for your ready wit, Colonel, and were your statements a little less chimerical might bring myself to believe them."

"Captain Von Rootzen," he continued, turning to the officer, "you will remove these men to the Castle of Bremlauz to await their trial for treason; in the meantime assign me four of your best troopers as an escort to my palace. But I forget! be good enough please to account for your presence here at this opportune moment."

"That, Your Highness, I beg may be told to you only."

The archduke walked aside and conversed with Von Rootzen in whispers for some minutes, then darting a curious look in our direction he quitted the room.

After a cold and damp ride in a sharp shower the colonel and I entered Bremlauz as prisoners, where we were immediately separated, and I was thrown into one of the many dungeons the castle possessed.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUNGEONS OF BREMLAUZ

The cold and darkness of my prison were not the best conditions in the world under which to consider my past experiences. The outlook was indeed depressing. More terrible than anything else however was the growing mystery. Who was the man so like myself that had kidnapped the archduke? Was it the same individual who had so frightened Marguerite? If so, what motive could be common to the two situations.

What did Colonel Von Heiner want with me when I met him? And why did my challenging him prevent his divulging the object of his seeking me out.

There was something most peculiar also in the knowledge the woman possessed of the archduke's imprisonment; what had been said seemed to indicate that she was acquainted with the exact state of affairs; evidently information had been given to her by somebody after His Highness had been incarcerated.

An hour after I entered the dungeon some wholesome food and a candle were placed at my disposal. Both were welcome as I was almost famished with hunger, and the few rays of the moon, which struggled through a narrow opening near the roof,

seemed merely to intensify the gloom that was almost intolerable to me in my excited state.

A little later a straw mattress was brought in by my guard upon which I threw myself, thoroughly exhausted, and soon became oblivious to everything.

I seemed only to have been asleep a few minutes when I was rudely awakened by a rough shaking; my eyes fell upon the figures of three men Two were masked and standing close to me, the third, who wore a cloak similar to that I had seen upon the shoulders of the archduke in the chateau, and who so closely resembled His Highness in general outline that I did not question his identity, was some distance back in the semi-darkness outside the circle of light which was diffused by a lantern brought by the intruders; my candle had gone out.

I sprang to my feet.

"Count," said one of the men. "His Highness the Archduke has, since the affair at the chateau had reason to believe that the information you gave him at that place is correct; he has come to receive further details from you."

I pondered deeply.

"Well, why this delay?" said the man.

"I made a vow that a certain individual should not be acquainted with some portion of my adventures," I responded.

The man crossed to the archduke and conferred with him a moment, then returned and replied, "His Highness promises you that the individual in question shall receive no information whatsoever

upon this subject; but to whom do you refer?"

"To Colonel von Heiner."

A muttered oath escaped the figure in the gloom.

"I can say nothing before these gentleman, I fear, Your Highness," I continued.

"You promised I understand merely that you would not tell Von Heiner," said the man who had been speaking. "His Highness holds himself responsible for us; we take our oaths not to divulge the secret to the colonel or anyone else, do we not?" he said turning to the other masked man.

"I swear it," was the reply.

"Remember your aid is demanded against treason," continued the man who had acted as spokesman for His Highness, "in any case we must be told, as it is our duty to discover the conspirators."

I was too positive at the time of the identity of the man I believed to be the archduke to doubt it, merely thinking his arrangements for conducting the enquiry strange. It was not for me to analyse the actions of a ruler.

Considering it to be the best course I then rapidly recounted my adventures, commencing with the tale told me at Maros by Marguerite and ending with my arrest, forgetting only one item.

"And these women?" said the spokesman, "was there nothing you could recognise them by?"

"I recognised none of them, although I fancied the spokeswoman was known to me; she was very tall and had a magnificent chin, the rest were all of medium height.

"And the man who headed those who captured you?" continued my questioner.

"Was dark and of medium height," I added.

"Did you observe any peculiar ornament upon the tall woman?" said the man.

"Yes," I replied, "a small flat beautifully designed pendant, attached to a chain surrounding her neck, in the centre of which flashed a magnificent diamond. The scintillations of the stone forced the trinket upon my attention."

"Did it resemble this," continued the man holding something up to my view.

"I could almost swear that it is the identical article," I replied.

The figure in the shadow murmured something to the questioners.

"You have told His Highness everything connected with your adventures of the last few days?" the latter asked.

I was about to reply in the affirmative when the recollection of my summons to Oranz flashed across my mind.

"With the exception of an affair dealing with a matter quite apart from any I have recounted," I answered.

"Are you certain of this however?" replied the man. "The slightest thing may have more bearing upon the present mysterious affair than you imagine. His Highness will, I am sure, be glad to be enlightened concerning this detail."

"I was summoned," I said, "on Thursday to Oranz, by an anonymous letter brought by an un-

known person; this document instructed me to be at that place an hour after daybreak on Friday morning last where information concerning a family secret of mine would be imparted it said."

"Did you go to Oranz?"

"Yes, only to be disappointed, to wait there the entire day, and then receive another anonymous letter brought by a countryman, which stated that events precluded the information being imparted on that day."

The man conferred with the archduke.

"His Highness wishes me to inform you that he considers you were wrong in treating this affair as irrelevant to the conspiracy; it is possible that your absence from your own home was necessary from the point of view of the criminals. Have you forgotten that your friends were waiting when you returned to Arndt and had in fact arrived soon after your departure?"

"You infer," I said, "that the writer of the letter was anxious to prevent a meeting between myself and my friends?"

"Yes, until after a certain hour. But have you nothing further to communicate?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"Then, I have been instructed to give you one word of advice before leaving. Under no circumstances trust the guardian of the Countess Linzorf, and should opportunity present itself complete your duel with Colonel Von Heiner and if possible kill him without mercy."

"I presume," I said, "that I may now count upon my release?"

"It is imperative that to lull the suspicions of certain people you remain incarcerated until morning," the spokesman said coldly.

"Then Your Highness is satisfied?" he queried.

An assent was growled. The three men left the dungeon, closing and barring the door, without addressing a single word more to me. The interview had seemed to warrant my immediate release.

Left alone, I reflected upon the situation. It was only then that a vague suspicion began to shape itself in my mind. Why had the archduke adopted such a strange way of conducting the examination? I felt in my pocket for the letter addressed to my three friends, placed there just before I left my home for the Lindenberg glade, and which I had intended to ask them to open in the event of my death. It was gone.

I must have slept longer than I thought, for shortly after my visitors left, daylight commenced to manifest itself at the narrow slit in the wall near the roof.

Throughout the remainder of the day, I awaited feverishly some fresh developments. Three times food and water were brought to me by a new jailer, who refused to answer any questions. I commenced to imagine terrible things concerning my sweet Marguerite, for I feared that in my absence some nefarious schemes might be accomplished.

I examined the dungeon minutely for means of escape, but found it to be composed entirely—floors,

walls, and vaulted roof—of massive blocks of stone. I felt that I could only await the pleasure of fate and resigned myself to another night in my prison. Unlike the previous one however I was unable to sleep at all and spent the time pacing the dungeon floor and allowing my imagination to run riot.

Several hours after dark however the door of my prison was flung open and a voice shouted, "Her Highness the Archduchess."

I forgot almost in my astonishment to salute the archduchness as her rank demanded.

"Your Highness," I said at length when I found words, "this is an unlooked for and unexpected pleasure."

The jailer withdrew and shut the door.

The archduchess looked towards it, in order to make quite sure that it was closed, then advancing said in a low voice, "Count, I have information to give you of very great importance."

"I am all attention, Madame," I answered.

"You have been wrongfully arrested," she continued, "and no one can be more sorry than the archduke himself. There is however a terrible secret in which your fiancée the countess is involved, and consequently you are concerned. You have been victimised and may be even more so. The archduke cannot help you in any way for a few days as he wishes to appear as though in ignorance, as much as possible, of the designs of his enemies. He is at the present moment compelled to absent himself from his capital, having set out within an hour of his return last night for Merlitz and has

sent his instructions to me by letter; everything depends entirely upon your sagacity, courage and strength. Converse with no one more than is required upon the subject of your adventures. It will be necessary for you to use your judgment in order to discover who are your friends and your enemies.

"In the meantime I have been instructed by His Highness to place the best horses in his stables at your service and to advise you to proceed with all speed to the house of General von Graubler where you may be just in time to prevent a terrible outrage, the nature of which I am unaware of. Leave your horse tethered in the main road and on no account walk up the Herlarz Road, but behind and close to the stone wall that divides it from the fields in order that you may be in a position to know what happens; but remember as you value your life, keep from the road unless necessity calls you there. Your mission is to reach the Chateau of Maros in safety.

" You may possibly find things perfectly peaceful, but in any case remember you are dealing with foxes and tigers and act as you consider best."

" Your Highness," I said, " did you state that the archduke left for Merlitz within an hour of his arrival yesterday ? "

" Yes."

" Then who was the man who impersonated him last night, after I was thrown into this place, or rather early in the morning ? " I cried.

"I do not understand you."

I then related the incident of my awaking and finding the three men in my dungeon.

A look of terror appeared upon the archduchess' face. "Count," she murmured, "believe me, there is some great catastrophe impending; this accounts for the disappearance of your jailer, he has been bribed and knowing that his villainy must be discovered has fled. Evidently the information you gave to these men was of vital importance. I will communicate with the archduke. In the meantime the letter lays especial stress upon the fact that you should set out immediately with the greatest secrecy. The archduke has ordered any men who have been attending to you and are likely to know of your release to be placed in solitary confinement, in order that as few people as possible shall be aware that you are at liberty. Your horse and arms will be brought to the West Gate by a trustworthy spy of my husband's, disguised as a groom. Ask him if the horse is for the prisoner."

"Has Colonel von Heiner been released?" I queried.

"The individual who brings your horse will have the latest information about this man: ask him. Your friend has escaped."

The archduchess led me by secret staircases and private corridors to a small door of the palace at the rear of the building; then supplying me with a mask, which she said had better be used until I had quitted the city, dismissed me.

I hastened to the West Gate.

A man as described by Her Highness was already there holding a magnificent grey horse.

In reply to my question he said, "Yes, this is your animal, Count, and these are your arms."

"What has become of Colonel von Heiner?" I asked.

"Colonel von Heiner," he responded, "is believed, from enquiries made, to be at Waldeau two hundred miles away, and as far as is known has not left that place for months. He is moreover a man closely resembling yourself."

"Then who was the person arrested with me yesterday, and that I hear has escaped?"

"I cannot say," replied the man.

"Then, good-night," I said, springing upon the horse, and a few moments later I was being borne rapidly through the moonlight.

I threw away my mask.

CHAPTER VII

THE ABDUCTION

There were twelve good miles between me and my destination, or rather the point at which I must part company with my horse. It was a beautiful night, clear and fresh. Close to the road on both sides for the first few miles were fields. My steed was a magnificent creature and galloped as though in thorough sympathy with the fierce impatience of its rider. The swift strong rhythm of its pace communicated itself to my brain and I revolved ceaselessly all the details of the terrible doings of the preceding days, hoping to find some clue which might elucidate them and thus allow me to form a plan of action.

Suddenly I became aware of a bright light in the direction of the woods ahead; as we flew onward it increased out of all proportion to the lessening distance; a great tongue of flame leapt into the air. A few minutes later the wind which was blowing towards the East brought a great smell of burning with it. Then the flames grew brighter and I saw that it was the Chateau of Waltzen ablaze. I soon found myself abreast of it and wondered what could have set this apparently deserted place on fire. Could it have been done deliberately? If so for what reason?

I had left the burning building well behind and was entering a small wood when I heard the sound of horses' hoofs in my rear.

At the instant several voices shouted from the forest, "Halt, or we fire!"

I spurred my horse violently and it sprang forward like an arrow.

Several shots rang out.

The noble animal, conscious of danger, sprang forward like a racer. For a few moments longer the sound of the hoofs behind were audible, then they suddenly died away. My pursuers had decided to give up the chase apparently.

Had this affair any connection with the conspiracy mentioned by the archduchess? I remembered the tales concerning the archduke's younger brother and his bitter hatred of the present head of the House: he had however been banished the kingdom for ever with the full concurrence of the Emperor of Austria. It was said he had sworn one day to turn the tables; I could see however no reason for his having greater hope of success at that moment than at the time of his expulsion; in fact many of his most powerful supporters were dead. Events however of such an extensive character could not I knew occur in connection with any ordinary affair, and I gazed apprehensively on all sides as I was borne forward.

However, nothing further occurred. I reached the road leading to Von Waldeau's home. About a quarter of a mile from the Herlarz junction there was a small copse; in this I tethered my

horse and then advanced rapidly towards the junction, the sign-post of which soon appeared in view. As advised by the archduchess, having examined my pistols and loosened my sword in its scabbard, I walked along the inside of the boundary wall, which was about a mile in length and constructed partly of earth at the junction end: the higher portion was composed entirely of masonry in mortar.

I proceeded cautiously for a little over three-quarters of a mile. At this point the road commenced to enter a more hilly region, and curved abruptly; on the left side the ground was so steep that it had been left uncultivated.

An indefinable sense of dread had gradually crept over me. I felt as though some calamity was impending and was not totally unprepared for the horrifying event which followed. A vague apprehension concerning my loved one seemed to converge into a special knowledge of her immediate danger. Undoubtedly there is much to be said in favour of the theory of thought transmission. Frequently in my own exerience, ideas concerning people have been followed rapidly by the advent of the individuals themselves.

Suddenly a piercing scream broke the silence; a voice, that of Marguerite, shrieked, "Help! help!" ending with a stifled moan; a horse plunged round the bend; I sprang upon the wall just in time to see my love in the arms of a masked man who was mounted upon it. The animal was

rushing at a terrific speed towards the junction. The ruffian, who had one hand upon the mouth of the struggling girl, striving to stop her cries for help, seemed the exact counterpart of myself, dressed as he was in clothes resembling mine.

The villain saw me and spurred his horse viciously; in a moment, before I could take the slightest action they had passed me and I heard the thud of hoofs receding in the distance.

I jumped to the ground again, determined to risk being seen in the moonlight and make a short cut across the fields in the direction of my horse, with the hope of being able by some means to come upon the trail of the kidnapper, when to my further astonishment I heard a man walking round the bend and whistling cheerfully.

I resolved to ascertain who this was, as it was a most uncommon thing for anyone to be upon the Herlanz Road at such an hour.

At a certain place some of the stones had slipped from the top of the wall. I waited there. A head appeared in front of the breach; it was that of the masked man who had captured and taken me to the Chateau of Dannerg.

I cleared the wall and gained the road. The man turned, with an exclamation of surprise, drawing his sword.

"Drop your weapon," I said, presenting a pistol, "or I will shoot you like a dog." His sword fell with a clatter to the ground.

"Now," I continued, "remember that you are dealing with a desperate man and one who has no

time to lose; answer my questions quickly or as the sky is above us I will have no mercy upon you."

The fellow trembled.

"Who was that man upon the horse?" I demanded.

"I cannot say."

"Where is he taking that lady?"

"I swear to you that I do not know."

"You lie, have a care, what reason has the woman whose orders I obeyed in attempting to rescue the archduke for helping this villain in his conspiracy?"

"I do not know."

"Then why are you here? Not for the sake of a promenade at this time of the night: your presence and this abduction are too great a coincidence to have been the work of mere chance; either you are a traitor to your mistress or are acting on her behalf."

"I swear to you that I am innocent of this affair, Count Adrain," he answered, "I have merely been upon a visit to a friend of mine who lives at the Chateau of Maros."

"In a mask?" I queried. "No my friend, I shall count three and if when I have ceased you still withhold the information, as I live you shall be shot without mercy."

"I will speak," the fellow said, "the man upon the horse was Count von Waldeau."

"Ha!"

"Concerning his future plans, I know nothing, but am the bearer of a letter which may give you the required information. Shall I pass it to you?"

"No, thank you," I replied, "place your hands well above your head."

I then advanced and taking his pistols dropped them into the side drain which was full of water and breaking his sword flung the pieces away. I tore the mask from his face; the fellow was unknown to me. Under his directions I felt for and abstracted the letter from his pocket.

It was a small packet addressed to Von Waldeau's brother and ran:—

"All is well, I will proceed to Vaschauz by the Orlau Road and await your coming at the hostelry of Orsavo, not passing through Nemesvar."

The letter seemed to have been written just before the capture of Marguerite, to be despatched in the event of success, for it appeared as though executed under difficult circumstances as the handwriting, although like Von Waldeau's, was shaky.

"Where is the count's brother?" I queried.

"He will be at the hostelry of Nemesvar in one hour's time."

This inn was situated about two miles from the Herlanz junction on the Nemesvar road which passed on the west side of the Chateau of Dannerg; that by which Marguerite was to be taken, passed on the east of the house; the roads met at Vaschauz. I recollected however that there were several connecting paths used as means of communication between the different villages.

"And now my friend," I said, "you will run."

"Run?"

"Yes, my horse is tethered in the copse at the

Herlanz junction; from information I have received this road is dangerous and should be avoided. We will strike across the fields and this piece of open ground. As it is necessary for you to precede me have the goodness to obey my instructions for your guidance promptly and exert yourself to the utmost. Remember that the honour and life of the woman I love are at stake and that I have not yet decided whether it is my best policy to kill you outright or not."

I thought it best to frighten the fellow thoroughly.

"I am ready," he growled.

We scaled the wall and rushed across the fields.

My necessary conversation with this man had not lasted as long as might appear. Impatience on my part and fear on his, had caused us to speak with great rapidity. The same emotions accelerated our pace now. We reached the copse in an exhausted condition, where the stranger threw himself upon the ground, gasping for breath.

To my delight, for I had felt it was possible my mysterious enemies might have injured or stolen my horse, the animal was safe and sound at the spot at which it had been tethered.

"Listen," I said, to the almost fainting man whom I had brought with me to prevent his being able to warn his friends; "you have kept information from me, even if you have not been an active agent in this affair; of that I am positive; if any harm comes to the Countess Linzorf I warn you never to cross my path again."

A short gallop brought me to the Orlau Road; I passed the footpath leading to Dannerg, which was impracticable for a horse and soon reached the bridle-path belonging to the chateau.

Here I paused. Was it possible that the abductor had gone to the old mansion? I reasoned that supposing his original intention had been to do so, the meeting with myself might have altered his plans; on the other hand if he had friends awaiting him there it would be necessary for him to communicate with them. In any case I considered that he would hardly have dared to halt long close to the scene of the outrage.

However, I was dealing with cunning people, and it was possible that they might calculate upon my reasoning in this manner. I determined to inspect the chateau before proceeding upon a long chase, as the time lost in accomplishing the former could be made up by extra exertion; an error however discovered after a ride which might lead me to Orsavo twenty miles away or even farther would be unrecoverable.

The chateau stood out gaunt and grim in the moonlight, there was not a sign of life in the gloomy windows; the huge mouldings threw strange shadows, and numerous turrets rearing their fantastic shapes appeared to be the watchful heads of some strange monster.

The main entrance was closed, but I found an open door leading into the servants' hall and searched the place hurriedly from the basement upwards. All was as silent as the grave and as

far as I could ascertain there was not a living soul in the building. I shouted loudly, but my voice rang hollow in the huge dining hall. My foot pressed upon something soft; I stooped to find it was a mask of blue velvet, probably one of those worn by the women upon the occasion of my adventure in the place. Thinking that it might be useful as a clue at some time I placed it carefully in my pocket. Then feeling that I was only wasting time I left the building and mounting my horse descended once more to the junction of the bridle path with the main road to Orlau.

At the moment of my arrival my attention was attracted by something upon the ground; examination proved it to be a bow from a lady's dress. I descended and recognised it as a blue one of a peculiar shape, such as I remembered Marguerite to have worn. This decided me, for the little piece of silk was on the main road, on the Orlau side of the junction and far enough from the bridle path to preclude any possibility of its having fallen from a person who was being carried up to the chateau. The thought occurred to me that it had been purposely dropped by my poor love to guide me, and I raised it reverently to my lips, swearing to rescue her from her terrible position or die in the attempt.

Then blaming my carelessness for not observing this valuable clue before my visit to the chateau, entailing as it did, the loss of such valuable time, I sprang upon and spurred my horse, which with a snort of anger sprang forward towards Orlau.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GUARDIAN OF THE BRIDGE

It may perhaps, in the further mysterious complications which ensued, appear that I acted without due discretion, and that had I calmly considered the whole bearings of the facts, the solution of the terrible enigma would have come to me earlier. I was however, and I think naturally, labouring under the stress of a terrible excitement, being confronted daily and sometimes hourly with some new fact which necessitated my suspecting a different person of either being the author of the plot or concerned in it. There appeared to be nothing to do save to attack each circumstance as it arose and attempt to wrest by brute force from it some clue which would give me definite plans to work upon. As will be seen, I did this, but found to my horror that practically each point gained was vitiated or further complicated by the next discovery.

I was resolved however to cease my efforts only when strength left me, and to pursue with unflagging energy my vigilant and elusive foe, hoping by sheer strength of will and indomitable persistence to penetrate the barrier of mystery which protected him and now enshrouded my sweet Marguerite.

The village of Orlau was ten miles from the Herlanz junction, it possessed an inn. Even if

Von Waldeau had only one horse, I doubted, owing to the delay, if I could overtake him before he reached this place. If he had procured an animal for Marguerite the chase might be prolonged indefinitely; how far my appearance had upset his arrangements I could not of course calculate; possibly he would not now wait for his brother's arrival.

My plans were of necessity indefinite. I intended to continue on the road to Vaschauz, some twenty-five miles from the Herlarz junction, unless events occurred which warranted a modification; fresh plans could be formed according to circumstances. I was well known by the innkeepers along the road and although having little ready money with me, knew there would be no difficulty in obtaining remounts where they were available.

Alternately walking, cantering and galloping, I had accomplished nearly eight out of the ten miles and was rapidly approaching a river, which was spanned by a rough timber structure, when turning a corner of the road I came suddenly upon this bridge in the centre of which, seated upon a horse and facing me, was a well-known figure.

It was that of Von Waldeau.

I approached him at a canter.

He drew a pistol and as I came close shouted furiously, "Halt! Count Arndt."

Reining in my horse and drawing in my turn a pistol, I replied with the question which was uppermost in my mind.

"What have you done with the Countess Linzorf, scoundrel?" I cried.

He gazed at me as though my question puzzled him, then there appeared in his eyes a comprehensive look charged with malice.

"Our curiosity," he said, "appears to be of a marvellously similar character, you will hardly credit me when I tell you that I was about to propound the same question to you."

"Indeed," I replied, "and I wonder if you have decided in the event of being unable to receive a suitable explanation to adopt the same methods as myself; hardly perhaps, the man who waits so patiently for the return of another, arranges a meeting at which he is too bashful to appear, abducts a defenceless woman, having previously planned that her protector shall be judiciously removed, and suffers upon the inopportune reappearance of this defender from another attack of modesty, is hardly the individual to have determined to act as I propose to, unless caught like a rat in a trap.

Von Waldeau appeared as though his emotions were choking him.

"O why," I continued, "have you troubled to remove your mask? Surely your rôle of the unknown might have continued a short time longer."

"Listen," said Von Waldeau in a scarcely recognisable voice, "my haste is too great for words; let us dispense with firearms, swords and swords only suit this occasion."

"I am agreeable, but—"

"Then on guard, on guard, liar!" he shouted, lashing hinself into an ungovernable fury and brandishing his weapon: the eyes that looked at

me flamed with fierce hatred and the lust of murder.

I replaced the pistol and drew my sword. Suddenly it struck me that Von Waldeau was not dressed in clothes resembling mine, anger had blinded my faculties.

At that moment the report of a gun rang out from the neighbouring low bushes that fringed the border of the forest at the top of the river bank. Von Waldeau reeled in his saddle and fell without a word to the ground; his terrified horse turned and tore madly along the road to Orlau.

I descended and ran to assist my fallen enemy: he was dead and had been shot through the brain.

My next action was to approach the bushes, keeping as much under cover as possible, from which the shot had come. A cloud of smoke still hung over them. There was however no sign of the murderer, he had disappeared into the forest where it was hopeless to search for him. It struck me that Marguerite might be concealed in the vicinity and I looked diligently upon both sides of the river, calling her by name, but without effect.

I then returned to Von Waldeau and searched the pockets of the dead man, considering that this was my right under the circumstances; but nothing was forthcoming which gave me even the slightest hint concerning the previous actions of Von Waldeau or the fresh mystery this terrible tragedy presented.

I was now concerned as to what would be the best course for me to pursue. It was necessary to

take steps calculated to remove any suspicion regarding myself from the minds of the authorities. On the other hand I could not afford to delay my pursuit of the captors of Marguerite; the increased mystery called for even greater speed in the prosecution of the chase, for I could only think that Marguerite was in the power of someone on the road ahead of me, although I could frame no definite theory.

The best course appeared to be to put a bold front upon the matter, enter the village and report the fact of the dead Count's body being found upon the road and state that I would return later to give all the evidence in my possession. However, much depended upon what might occur at the village.

With a last glance at the dead man, whose body I removed from the track, and wondering at his behaviour, which was as inexplicable as all the other portions of the problems that confronted me, I continued my journey.

About a mile from the village, signs of human labour began to appear; the forest ended and the road again entered cultivated land.

As I reached the crest of a small hill the empty village street appeared; from the hostelry a huge signboard swung creaking in the breeze; opposite the house an enormous drinking trough for cattle lay a black mass in the moonlight like some huge sarcophagus. I wondered how much sense it would be possible to extract from the landlord at that time of the night, or rather morning. I did not anticipate much news concerning those I was

following, however he would almost certainly have heard them passing, as it was unusual for travellers to be on the road at night, and they might possibly have called. Moreover, he seemed the best person to report the murder to.

Trotting up to the entrance I hammered at the door both with the pommel of my sword and my boot.

To my surprise the window was thrown rapidly and violently open; the landlord looked down upon me and growled. "Is it not possible for an honest man to obtain even ten minute's, sleep?"

"The amount of slumber left to you to-night, my good Hermann," I said, "depends upon the celerity of your answers."

"Ah, it is you, Count Adrian, pardon my rudeness, but this is the fourth time to-night I have been dragged from my bed."

"The fourth time?"

"Yes, and besides the devil himself swept through the village a few minutes ago, for no horse ridden by man ever galloped at such a pace."

Evidently the innkeeper referred to the riderless steed of the murdered man.

"And your visitors, my good Hermann?" Possibly their names may supply the information I require."

"Were Colonel von Heiner, two hours since—"

"How do you know the individual was Colonel von Heiner?" I interrupted.

"Because he asked for a letter left by a lady a week ago, addressed to a person of that name."

"I see; your logic is weak, nevertheless you may

be correct, and what was this Colonel like, did he wear a mask?"

"No; he was not unlike yourself, Count, tall and dark."

"And what road did he take?"

"That to Orsavo."

"What was the lady like who left the letter?"

"Very tall and dark. I did not know her. She came from the direction of Orsavo."

"And your second visitor?" I queried.

"Arrived an hour later than the colonel."

"His business?"

"To enquire if the colonel had called at the inn."

"Did he come from the Herlarz direction?"

"I cannot say, but he took the road to Orsavo."

"What was the appearance of the second individual?"

"A fair man of middle height."

"Can you give no better description than that?" I queried. "Was there nothing that would enable you to tell him from any other fair man of that height?"

"Nothing," replied the innkeeper, "save that he had a splash of mud upon his right cheek."

"That was not mud, my friend, I fancy, but a birthmark."

"You know him then, Count Arndt?"

"I think so," I replied, for it struck me that he individual might be the man who had represented himself as Von Heiner and who had accompanied me to the Chateau Waltzen. I remembered having noticed a red mark on his right cheek.

"And now describe the third person," I said.

"The third and the fourth."

"Were there two?"

"Yes, a man and a woman."

"Were they upon separate horses?" I queried.

"Yes, but one animal looked much fresher than the other. The man, Count, was I should judge about the same height as yourself and now I come to think of it was dressed like you also; he was masked and enquired if the colonel had called at the inn."

"And the woman, what of her?"

"I was unable to see much of her, for she was closely muffled in a silken shawl, but I believe she was masked also."

"And what direction did these two take?"

"They went towards Orsavo and have scarcely been gone half an hour."

"Did these people let fall anything concerning their ultimate destination?"

"Nothing, Count."

"Listen," I said, throwing a gold piece into the open window. "Count von Waldeau lies dead close to the bridge over the Evona. Oblige me by giving the necessary information to the authorities and see that the body is brought to the village at the earliest possible moment. You will state that I am now engaged upon very important business, but that when it has been completed I will return and relate such facts as I am acquainted with. State that in the meantime I consider it advisable to have the neighbourhood well searched and full enquiries

made, as the dead count appears to have been shot through the brain and the assassin is probably close at hand."

The information given me by the innkeeper concerning the number of strange people on the road relieved me of any apprehension that I might be suspected of the crime.

The mystery had deepened even more. Who were the first and last men? The first certainly was not Von Waldeau, for the innkeeper knew him as well as he did me. What was the mission of the unknown whom I had challenged to fight the duel and who had escaped from the Castle of Bremlauz? My course was clearly to continue as rapidly as possible along the road, to overtake someone and force information from them.

In a few minutes I had left the little village with its deep shadows cast by the moonlight far behind.

CHAPTER IX

THE INN AT VASCHAUZ

Between Orlau and Vaschauz, fifteen miles away, there was one hamlet, that of Orsavo. For the most part the road ran through cultivated land with here and there an occasional plantation of trees; one came now and then upon solitary homesteads or little groups of cottages; sometimes stone pillars marked the entrances to the grounds of the wealthy.

The moonlight shone upon a brighter scene altogether, and freed from the oppressive gloom of the forest with its fantastic shapes and shadows, my spirits rose and for the first time since my release from the Castle of Bremlauz I felt hopeful.

My horse however commenced to feel the strain, and I determined if it could be done to get another animal at Orsavo. I feared that this would be impossible and could only hope that the horses of those who were being pursued were in a similar plight; mine had however as far as I knew accomplished many more miles than theirs.

I approached Orsavo with a beating heart. Was I in time? or had the vulture flown?

At last I entered the village. The solitary street was a facsimile of that of Orlau, but there was one difference; from the open door and windows of the inn there streamed light.

Leading my horse into the shadow about a hundred yards from the inn and tethering it, I advanced as noiselessly as possible.

No sound came from within. I crept slowly through the passage with my hand upon my pistols and peeped into the common room.

There was a solitary man seated there. It was the innkeeper, gazing upon a half filled glass of wine with an abstracted air. I knocked gently with my knuckles to attract his attention: he sprang to his feet with an ejaculation of surprise as his eyes fell on me.

I enjoined silence with a motion of my hand and beckoned to him.

"You have guests, have you not?" Where can we speak without fear of interruption?" I whispered as he approached.

"No noise," I continued imperatively; "they must not know of my arrival."

He signed to me to follow and we crept quietly through the passage into a room at the back of the house and closed the door.

"Who are your visitors?" I demanded.

He appeared to resent my questioning, but reflecting perhaps that it would not be to his advantage to offend a person so influential as myself, answered.

"There are now two, Count."

"Did you have more?"

"Three."

"And these?"

"Were a man and a woman, both being masked."

"What direction did they take?"

"Towards Vaschauz?"

"And what of the others?"

"They are Count Rudolph, a fair man of medium height with whom I am not acquainted, and a groom who is with the horses."

"How long is it since the man and woman have departed?" I asked.

"Half an hour," was the answer.

I had apparently made no gain. The question was now whether I should continue the chase immediately or attempt to force some information from the men above. I would have taken no such risk but pressed forward, only I felt sure my old friend was an honourable man and was convinced that he would insist upon fair play.

"Lead me to the Count Rudolph," I said to Werner.

As we ascended the stairs a fierce excitement swept over me at the thought that I was perhaps on the point of solving the great problem.

Not a sound emanated from the room above; a matter of great moment appeared to be under quiet discussion.

The host threw open the door: announcing my my name.

The room was empty. I turned to the innkeeper; his face expressed blank astonishment.

"When the others left, I brought them more wine," he said, "and ten minutes ago I heard laughter."

"See," he resumed, going to the table, "they have left the price of their refreshments."

I perceived at the same moment that the window in the shadow at the far end of the room was open. I sprang towards it and peered out into the garden. The room beneath was very low and the drop did not exceed twelve feet; a person hanging by the hands could fall without fear of harm on the soft ground below; evidently this was the means of escape.

"They must be below," I said, rushing down the stairs, followed by the innkeeper, into the garden; but there were no signs of them whatsoever.

"The stables. Where are their horses? You must have heard them go," I exclaimed to the man.

"The horses were not brought inside but sent up the road towards Vaschauz when the woman and her companion left and the groom was told to carefully watch the cross road, about a quarter of a mile from here, for what reason I do not know."

"What was the groom like?"

"Well, a queer-looking fellow, a short dark man."

Apparently the individual had joined the party with Rudolph, for the innkeeper at Orlau had not mentioned a lackey.

"Then I have no time to waste," I said, running through the doorway. Then it occurred to me that they might still be hiding in the house. I returned and made a hurried but fruitless search in the five rooms which comprised the hostelry. As I finished a horse made a loud noise as though in pain.

I once more darted through the door and went

towards my steed. The poor brute was upon the ground dead; it had been stabbed.

My shouts brought Werner upon the scene.

"Who has done this?" I raved. The fellow's jaw dropped.

"I swear to you," he said, when he could find words, "that I do not understand this."

"Where are your men?" I demanded.

"One sleeps at his home two miles away, the other obtained leave to go to Orlau, where his father lives, and is spending the night there.

"Werner," I said, "believe me, if you are playing me false and attempting to hinder my pursuit of these men you will live to regret it."

The fellow loudly protested his innocence and I felt convinced that he knew nothing of the strange occurrence. That he had not done it personally was at least certain as we had not parted company from the moment I entered the inn. I left it to go straight to the horse.

"I must have a fresh horse," I said.

"Impossible, sir," he replied; "there is not one within three miles and you cannot rely upon getting a good animal nearer than Vaschauz, which as you know is five miles away."

"You heard nothing, I suppose," I said, "concerning the ultimate destination of these people?"

"Nothing, sir."

I made a final search in the neighbourhood of my poor grey steed that had served me so well, but could find nothing to guide me as to who had killed it.

There remained one thing only for me to do and that was to go on foot to Vaschauz. For an instant my sky had seemed to clear, but now, without warning, a great darkness had descended, blotting out all light and hope. With an effort however I threw off my terrible dejection, determined to overcome this fresh obstacle and to make up for lost ground after my arrival at Vaschauz.

Alternately running and walking, and forcing back all thoughts concerning the possibilities the delay might cause, I arrived at length at my destination.

Vaschauz was a much larger place than either of the other two hamlets through which I had passed; situated as it was at the junction of four roads a considerable amount of business was transacted there.

To my joy I saw a light in the hostelry of the place. Keeping in the shadow, but close enough to the doorway to intercept anyone who came out of the building, I paused five minutes to recover from the effects of my arduous journey. Then determined at all costs to beard my foes, be they small or great in number, I entered the inn from which as I crossed the threshold the sound of voices and laughter was issuing. If however I had been surprised before, I was destined to be even more so at the sight about to be revealed.

I flung open the door of the common room; it was full of troopers. A man sat over the fireplace; he glanced up expectantly at my entrance, then sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment. It

was Von Rootzen, the Captain of the Guard.

"You here, Count," he said.

"Von Rootzen," I replied, "what does this mean?"

"You may well enquire; but I fear that my ignorance is as great as yours. My knowledge consists of the fact that I was ordered to come to this place and am here. But stay, possibly your presence may be required." So saying he abruptly left the room.

"Men," I said, throwing some money upon the table, "has anyone passed along the road from Orsavo?"

"Pardon, sir," one of them answered, "our instructions are to hold no communication with anyone."

As I was about to leave the room in quest of the landlord the Captain hastily re-entered the room and said, "Will you have the goodness to follow me, Count Adrian!"

I assented, and he led the way to a room situated at the back of the one we had just vacated, opened the door, announced me and retired.

I entered and found myself in the presence of the archduchess. Astonishment held me speechless.

"Count Adrian," she said, "I believed that you were at Maros."

"Madam," I answered, recovering myself, "I remember leaving you at Bremlauz."

"I will explain my presence," she said, speaking in low tones, "when you have made your own appearance here clear to me."

I rapidly ran over the events of the last few hours, she followed me closely with her eyes fixed upon the ground and her bosom heaving with a suppressed excitement that I could not understand.

"Then I have seen her," she said as my narrative came to a close.

"Marguerite! then she is here?"

"No; the woman you have been pursuing. A little over an hour ago, hearing the sound of horses, I peeped between the stairs and the wall; there were two people in the passage, one a man unmasked, the other a masked woman who seemed to be in a half-fainting condition. The Captain of the Guard also reported their arrival a little later."

"And who was this woman, Your Highness?" I questioned.

"I cannot say, but that she was very much taller than the Countess Linzorf, so that you may rest assured it was not your Marguerite."

"And the man, Madame, did you recognise him?"

"The man was the Count Rudolph."

She paced the room as though something weighed upon her mind.

"Your Highness," I said, "will you pardon my impatience, but I am anxious to know what has become of these people. Did you see no other men?"

"My soldiers said they set out nearly an hour ago, but no one noted the direction taken. There was no one with them, for I should have heard

or seen them, also their arrival would certainly have been communicated to me."

"You made no attempt to stop them, Your Highness?"

"Why should I do so?"

"But the masked woman, Madame. You surely knew of the possibility of an abduction when you sent me upon my mission."

"I knew no details," the archduchess replied, "but merely repeated the instructions of the archduke when I warned you; in any case I should not have connected that very tall woman in the company of your best friend, the Count Rudolph, with the Countess Linzorf. You say you intend to continue the pursuit; this appears to be absurd. What is your object?"

"To force information from the pair," I replied.

At that moment there was a knock at the door. The permission to enter was followed by the appearance of Van Rootzen.

"The innkeeper states," he said, "that this letter has just been handed to him by a stranger, who left at once, with instructions that it was to be given to the Count Adrian. I thought perhaps it might be inadvisable to delay the delivery."

As the Captain of the Guard retired, with the permission of Her Highness, I tore open the envelope. The contents were as follows:—

"Do not delay, but proceed at once to the Chateau of Dannerg where you will find the Countess Linzorf imperfectly guarded. I will join you there and together we will make short work

of the cowardly ruffians who watch your fiancée. The actual abductor is absent upon important affairs.

"The man whom you mistook for
"Colonel von Heiner."

I handed the missive to the archduchess; as she read it she involuntarily pressed her hand upon her heart; her face had become pallid. As she raised her eyes to mine I saw a look in in their blue depths that I had never observed before; the habitual haughtiness had vanished, in its place there dwelt a melting tenderness.

"Count," she whispered, looking up at me appealingly, "is this woman everything to you? Is there no other who could if certain barriers were removed take the place she was never worthy to occupy?"

"I tell you," she continued fiercely, seeing the look of dissent in my eyes, "you have been deceived, basely betrayed."

"By whom, Madame?" I asked.

"The Countess Linzorf," she replied.

"The woman who was being carried along the Herlanz road by the masked horseman was not acting, Madame," I answered sternly, "such a look of horror as her countenance wore could not be feigned."

"Nevertheless, Count, I repeat you have been betrayed."

"Madame," I said, "I must leave you."

Her words had so angered me that for the mo-

ment I forgot the question of her presence at Vaschauz.

"One moment, Sir, I command you," she replied, her old dignity asserting itself.

I bowed.

All traces of the softer emotions had left the cold calm eyes that looked imperiously into mine. The transformation was so complete that I began to doubt my previous impressions and felt that I must have mistaken sympathy for some deeper emotion.

"The letter you have received has of course altered your plans," she said.

"I think," I replied, "my experiences warrant hesitation; in the first place I do not know the name of the individual who is supposed to have signed the letter, much less can I be certain that the writing is his, and even if it were I might be forgiven for wondering if it were written in my interests. However, as you say the woman I have been pursuing is not Marguerite it is possible she was carried to the chateau and may have been concealed in some secret room. Then there is the question of the silken bow."

"That," said the archduchess, "may have been placed as a lure to secure your passing the chateau.

"Then why was my horse killed at Orsavo?"

"Perhaps an act of pure brutality, a mere coincidence."

"I do not think that can be so,Madame, but if I cannot ascertain which of the three roads the woman and Count Rudolph have taken, it will

perhaps be better for me to return home, obtain assistance, and form fresh plans; on the way I will call at the chateau and shall be in a position to see if the letter was written in good faith. Before leaving however, Your Highness, you promised to explain to me the object of your visit here."

Excitement had made me forget this.

"The archduke has summoned me from Bremlauz to await his further instructions here. If the conspiracy which he fears is annihilated I shall return, if not he desires me to join him at Merlitz."

The village of Vaschauz was situated half way between the capital and the town mentioned, at the junction of the roads from the chateau of Dannerg to Munden and Bremlauz to Merlitz. The road over which I had travelled consisted of two sides of a triangle, making a total of thirty-seven miles, the archduchess had traversed one side only, comprising about twelve miles.

It was the proximity of Bremlauz which had in the light of recent events decided me to return to my own home and reorganise my search after enquiries at Maros, should definite information concerning the direction of Rudolph and the woman not be forthcoming.

"Remember, Count," resumed the archduchess, "that perhaps upon you hangs the fate of my husband's dominions and probably that of Austria itself. If that letter was written by the person who accompanied you as a fellow prisoner to the Castle of Bremlauz, you have no cause to fear the truth of the statements therein, for he was allowed to escape

and is to my knowledge one of the most honourable men in the Empire of Austria, although I cannot I regret tell you his name yet. In any case I beg, nay implore you, to pursue the mystery ceaselessly until you have solved it. If events are not satisfactory at the chateau you must return cautiously to Bremlauz on Tuesday, where, if my husband orders me to return, I shall be again, and present yourself to the archduke before the evening at the Palace. Should the conspiracy be crushed the archduke can act openly, for there will be no longer necessity for concealment, and help you to recover the countess. If the rebellion has ripened you must make the best arrangements possible and join us at Merlitz. In the meantime have courage. I beg to remind you of the deeds of the ancient race from which you have sprung.

"The Captain of the Guard will be only too pleased to supply you with another animal to replace your unfortunate beast," she said after a short interval which we both spent in musing, then swept haughtily from the room.

I could obtain absolutely no further information from anyone concerning the mysterious movements of Rudolph and the masked woman or the rest of the party, no one in fact had seen any traces of the latter. There remained nothing therefore but the return journey to Arndt.

A thought struck me. Was the man who wore the mask at Orlau the same person who wore it at Orsavo?

CHAPTER X

THE TRAGEDY OF THE RUINED CHATEAU

Day broke as I galloped upon the return journey to the chateau. A cold wind had arisen and blew refreshingly upon my burning temples. My exhausted and harassed brain refused to speculate further upon the chance of my decision being the correct course. I could only hope for the best.

At Orsavo and Orlau, enquiries from the respective innkeepers elicited no further information than the fact that the body of Count Von Waldeau had disappeared; searchers had returned reporting that there were no traces whatsoever of a crime.

The events that occurred during the next few hours were of so startling a nature that I have often wondered why in my exhausted condition they did not unbalance my mind. The appearance of the absolutely unexpected is always accompanied, however small the personal interest taken in the event, by a slight shock; when however the greater conceptions of our existence suddenly seem to have been founded upon erroneous assumptions, the hour of the discovery brings with it sensations that shake our natures to their inmost depths.

I worshipped Marguerite and believed her to be a perfect type of womanhood, and of all those beautiful qualities she seemed to possess there was one

that had appeared to dominate her nature entirely, namely honour. She had told me that she truly loved me; I believed her and did not doubt that if anything had occurred to alter her feelings she would have acquainted me with it instantly. The events which transpired however at the chateau were I think calculated to raise the gross emotion of suspicion in the most trusting nature.

Worn with fatigue and excitement, aching in every limb, I turned the corner of the road that brought the ruined mansion of Dannerg into view. The road gradually ascended from the house and was at this point about one hundred feet above it. The hill upon which the chateau stood was situated at the foot of a mountain the top of the former being at least two thousand feet lower than the crest of the latter. This peak was the highest in the districts and around it in the summer months fierce thunderstorms raged: emerging from dense forests, it was visible from my house and I had frequently watched the thunder clouds discharging their lightning flashes and sailing with awful grandeur towards it as though bent upon the destruction of the mighty rocky mass.

The ground was quite level for a considerable distance around the house and jutted out towards the road; upon this point were two figures, evidently those of women.

My heart beat frantically and I spurred my horse, forgetting completely all weariness.

The figures rapidly became more distinct; first I recognised to my joy Marguerite and then to my

surprise the masked woman. What could have induced her to tear about the country in this fashion, and what manner of woman was she who could accomplish such feats of horsemanship? Why moreover did she persist in wearing a mask?

As I passed on they were hidden from sight by a mass of rocks and when I had rounded this had disappeared. They had been looking in the direction of the main road and did not seem to have observed me, although I had waved my handkerchief boisterously, not caring to shout for fear of attracting the attention of enemies.

I determined not to hesitate, also the masked woman had already held my life in her hand and there appeared to be no reason for believing that her intentions towards myself had changed.

I galloped up the narrow bridle path, joy revelling in my breast at the thought that my troubles if not ended were at least no longer of so vague a nature. I hoped in a few moments to know the names and objects of my enemies. In my excitement I forgot that the pseudo Von Heiner had not presented himself.

The entrance appeared and there, framed by the old mouldering doorway, stood my sweet Marguerite, her white draperies floating in the breeze. But the glad words of joy remained frozen upon my lips, for I saw that I was not welcome, nay more, that my presence was the cause of consternation.

As her eyes fell upon me she reeled and clung for support to the woodwork, and if I had not sprung from my horse and caught her, would have fallen to the ground.

"Marguerite! Marguerite!" I whispered, "I am indeed thankful to know that you are safe."

She did not answer me, however, and I feared every moment that she would faint.

With a great effort however she recovered herself; then gazing round in an agony of terror, walked slowly inside the building.

I followed, too stupefied at her conduct to speak. My eyes however devoured the form that was so dear to me; but the proud poise of the head was gone, the lithe figure formerly so quick and graceful seemed to lack its wonted spring and fire, her limbs lagged as though too inert to overcome the slight resistance of her rustling draperies, from which was wafted the subtle odour of some fragrant perfume. I longed to hear the cause of this deep, strange distress and comfort my suffering love.

When we reached the dining hall in which I had so narrowly escaped with my life, she paused by a table on which some refreshments were spread and stood looking upon the ground, her hand upon her heart and her bosom heaving beneath the lace that covered it.

I waited impatiently for her to speak. At last she murmured looking up, "Adrian, I know all and will explain, but first take some refreshments or you will never withstand the blow that awaits you."

I gazed into the bright eyes which had always met my glance so firmly and trustfully, but my love turned from me with a gentle sigh.

"I cannot touch food, Marguerite," I said, "until I have this explanation; let me ask you to speak quickly. If you say you know all, you must be acquainted with the nature of the arduous journey I have returned from and the terrible strain to which I have been subjected."

"Oh, I know you have suffered," she wailed, "but take some wine first if nothing else."

"See," she said, holding up a silver goblet with a trembling hand, "this will infuse fresh life into you."

The cold of the damp room with its stone floor seemed to affect her, for she shuddered as though the wing of the dark angel had brushed her cheek.

"Very well," I assented, "if it pleases you," and I drank the contents of the goblet.

As I replaced it upon the table I met Marguerite's eyes, they were round and staring with horror; her face had become as white as marble.

"Speak," I uttered hoarsely, "tell me this news."

As my hand fell upon her shoulder I felt her trembling violently; her eyes fixed themselves upon a spot in the shadows. I followed them and it seemed to me that some indistinct form stirred slightly. I sprang forward; only the rotting tapestry and the stone wall behind it appeared.

I returned to find Marguerite with eyes again upon the floor.

"Adrian," she murmured, "I know as I said all that has happened and wish to tell you that I no longer love you: forget that such a person as myself

ever existed. Leave me, return to your old life, you will be unharmed. Should you continue to interfere with the workings of this conspiracy now afoot it can only mean death for both of us. Whatever might have been is forbidden for ever; let the words we have spoken be a pleasant memory only, the dreams we have dreamed but the visions of a sweet slumber from which we have been awakened to find ourselves denizens of the kingdom of mortal terror. I beg again of you to put all memories of me from you for ever and think of Marguerite as only an unstable creature, so despicable as to cause a manly, loving nature needless pain.

"See!" she cried hysterically, offering me her ring, "here is the pledge you gave me of your devotion; return mine and leave me for ever."

I replaced it upon her finger. "And will you swear," I demanded, a tide of frightful anger surging through me, "that you no longer love me. Look! raise your eyes to mine, Countess of Linzorf; swear by the honour of your race if it be so."

"Speak!" I insisted, placing my left hand upon her other shoulder and gazing down into her face.

She slowly raised those sweet eyes in which I had so often seen the lovelight glisten; it shone there now, but through the tearful agony of a tortured soul, or she was indeed a skilful actress.

"It is not true! It is not true!" I cried, "what devilry is proceeding I know not, but this I swear, you shall not remain in this den of infamy an instant longer." I attempted to take her in

my arms and bear her to my horse, but was seized with a sudden vertigo and fell backward against the table.

A man's loud laugh rang through the hall.

I realised that I had been poisoned and by the woman I loved; but who could laugh at such a moment? Surely there was life enough yet to enable me to pay back the debt to the villain who not only robbed and murdered me but revelled in his deed!

I rallied and drew my sword, but the room whirled round me, and a moment later my weapon fell from my nerveless hand with a clang to the stone pavement, and supported by Marguerite I sank upon the floor; for an instant as in a dream I saw her face bathed in tears.

"Ah!" I moaned despairingly, "you have killed me," and became unconscious.

I returned to my senses to find myself lying upon the cold floor of the dining room. How long I had been in a state of stupor it was impossible for me to guess, for I had forgotten to wind my watch and it had stopped. Not a sound broke the stillness. For a few seconds I had been unable to account for my position, then all came back to me. My pistols were in my belt and my sword was lying where it had fallen.

With parched mouth and throbbing head I raised myself upon one elbow eventually staggering to my feet. What had become of Marguerite? Why had the poison not been stronger?

I proceeded to walk round the room in order to

examine the dark portions, but faintness compelled me to rest awhile upon a chair.

As I sat, my eyes discerned in a corner of the room an indefinite mass; there was something in its general outline which fascinated me.

As soon as the faintness had passed I advanced towards it. A cloth covered some human shape.

I lifted the red covering; the something was the figure of a man and that man was the unknown whom I had challenged and who was called Von Heiner by the masked woman; he had kept his appointment.

I dropped the cloth with a shudder, but stifling my weakness again raised it and placed a hand upon the forehead: it was that of a corpse. There was no sign of a wound upon the head or neck and the clothes bore no traces of blood. Had this man been poisoned also? With a groan at my unutterable helplessness in the face of the monstrous enigma that confronted me and almost hourly grew, I replaced the cloth reverently upon the body.

My strength gradually returned and with it a furious desire for vengeance. Seizing my sword I explored room after room of the chateau, hoping to find someone upon whom to visit my wrath. A few rooms were scantily furnished with old and worm-eaten articles, in some cases the rain had penetrated the rooms and rotted things. The villains however, whoever they might be, had fled, apparently although there were traces of recent occupation. In the grate of one room there was a partly burned envelope addressed to Von Meinter.

Evidently if anyone remained in the chateau they were secure in some secret hiding-place. I examined the walls and tapped the panels in every direction, then realising the hopelessness of the task determined to leave the place, return to my own castle and obtain there in security the rest which was absolutely necessary. When I was refreshed new plans could be formed.

My horse, as I fully expected, was missing and I arrived in an exhausted condition at Arndt late in the afternoon. Enquiries from my servants only elicited the facts that Marguerite had been abducted and her guardian had set out for Bremlauz in connection with the affair; no details they said were available even at Maros.

Giving orders that no one was to disturb me unless upon matters of the greatest urgency, I flung myself upon my bed and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER XI

REMEMBRANCES

Daylight was streaming into my room when I awoke, the servants had taken me at my word and allowed me to remain undisturbed. I regretted not giving instructions to be called at daybreak.

Notwithstanding my experiences I made a hearty breakfast. The first thing to be done was obviously to visit the Chateau of Maros and obtain all information possible, not that I anticipated learning much more than I knew from that source.

I found the Chateau unusually silent; the servants regarded me with mixed glances of curiosity and suspicion. I wondered why. Marguerite's maid stated that she had slept throughout the entire night; nothing had disturbed her. Von Graubler they told me had not troubled about her absence at first, believing that her early morning stroll had been extended, as sometimes occurred; but when the time passed and she had made no appearance, messengers were sent in every direction to make enquiries; they returned with the information that my three friends and myself were all missing. The windows of her room had been found open, but had not been forced.

The general had ridden with his sister to the Capital, from whence he had neither returned nor

forwarded news. Why had he done this? No one appeared to know what grounds he had for suspecting an abduction, yet the men stated it was his opinion that Marguerite had been forcibly taken. Evidently he believed too late her version of the masked man.

I asked for the old groom who Von Graubler had informed me had picked up the letter dropped by Marguerite. He appeared, a shambling taciturn fellow, such a very strange individual indeed that I had often wondered why the general, whom I thought was a fair judge of character, placed his ward under the man's protection. Von Graubler however was so obstinate that any suggestion of alteration would have merely caused him to adhere more firmly to his arrangement.

"General von Graubler informed me," I said, addressing the man when he arrived, "that you picked up a letter which was dropped by the Countess Linzorf some days since when out riding."

"I told my master so," was the answer given in sullen tones.

There was an accent upon the words, "my master."

"And did you not think so," I questioned, for I was suspicious of the fellow, and thought if made angry he might betray himself.

But his manner remained unchanged as he remarked, "Sir, if I had not seen the letter fall from the dress of the countess, I should not have thought it belonged to her."

"Have you ever," I said, "seen any suspicious person watching the countess when you have been out riding with her?"

"Never, sir."

"And you have never seen her speak to an unknown individual?"

"I have told all I know to my master and can answer no more questions," the fellow said sulkily.

"Listen," I replied angrily, taking him by the throat, "have you ever seen the countess speaking to an unknown person?"

"Never," he responded, throwing for the first time his baleful glance full upon me, "I swear it."

I freed the man reluctantly, feeling that he knew more about the outrage than he had admitted.

With a sinking heart I left the chateau and walked into the grounds, hoping to be able to think out some ideas concerning my future actions.

But thought refused to come; a great misery enveloped me as in a shroud. The path of some men's lives is strewn with roses; to others the joys and sorrows are meted out in equal proportion; but to blast the pleasures and hopes of the unlucky few, upon whom misfortune has set her brand, all nature seems to stir itself.

Notwithstanding my wealth and position, until I met Marguerite misery had been my portion from the hour I was brought into being. There is no necessity and it is not my intention to give a list of my misfortunes, the last and the greatest of which eclipsed all its predecessors.

As I wandered through the grounds I remem-

bered that it was one year exactly since I had heard the vow of my first and only love; she who, bursting like the morning sun over the horizon of my night of misery, paled the innumerable stars of bitter circumstances until they vanished in the brightness of her own tender affection.

From the moment that I knew my passion was returned, on fortune's face the smile appeared which I now understood was one of mockery. The circumstances that had seemed to act for our mutual happiness were but the weaving of the web destined to entangle us both.

How often had I beheld her image in that place, that perfect form framing the sweet modesty of maidenhood. Her gentle spirit had permeated all nature, which now robbed of her presence, was to me a thing inanimate, of worthless properties, save the one that I trusted would soon engulf me, death.

As I stood by the rustic seat overhung by trees, where together we had watched the bursting buds in the early days of Spring, the dead leaves of Autumn swirled in rustling masses, seeming to assume weird taunting forms as they swept past me. The canopy of green, the deep rich tint we so admired had disappeared; in its place the hard grey clouds flew swiftly onwards; the branches almost bare, swung drearily to each cold gust.

The water of the pond, the mirror-like surface of which had reflected the sylvan surroundings, and fairer than all in its peerless beauty her own dear face, as laughing, with arms entwining a leaning

tree, she overhung the bank, was wrinkled in tiny wavelets, and lashed the miniature shore. All, all, seemed changed.

Had she indeed altered, I wondered? Could such an angelic countenance be the mask of a treacherous nature?

I seated myself upon a low bench.

And then occurred one of those strange events, reported so frequently, yet so incomprehensible from the standpoint of our present knowledge, that the statements of those subjected to them are often received with cynicism so coarse that many prefer to wonder over them in silence, to subjecting delicate and private experiences to the ridicule of the unsympathetic and unimaginative. Whether the extraordinary stress to which my emotions had been subjected rendered certain special powers hypersensitive or whether indeed my adventures caused my overwrought nerves to produce certain illusions, I know not, but suddenly my whole consciousness became flooded by a further agonising sense of misery. Marguerite, robed in black, her face turned from me, stood between the seat and the lake, sobbing silently.

The deepest sorrow was depicted in the attitude of the form I loved so dearly, which shuddered beneath the violent storm of grief that shook it. As at the chateau, a great longing to comfort my poor love took possession of me, to break down the barrier of mystery that separated us and tortured her, whatever the cost might be. Surely none had ever suffered as she did now; such soul-felt agony

would indeed atone for much; nay, I would not, could not, believe that there was anything to forgive; the terrible tragedy of the chateau would be explained and my love vindicated.

I strove to rise or speak but seemed spellbound; with a mighty effort I raised myself; even as I did so the vision vanished.

I had no time to speculate upon the phenomenon at that moment however, for my eyes fell upon a sight which caused my heart to thump violently. Staring at me curiously from the other side of the lake with his hand resting upon the hilt of his sword was the masked stranger who had carried off Marguerite.

The little lake was divided in two portions, separated in the middle by a narrow neck of water spanned by a bridge. I rushed towards this.

A laugh of derision greeted me; the horrid mocking cachinnation that forced itself upon my fleeting consciousness in the old dining hall of the chateau brought back again all the terror and anguish of that fateful moment.

The laugh was followed by the report of a pistol and a bullet sang unpleasantly near me. I reached the bridge in time to see the man disappear behind a little summer house upon the border of the plantation opposite.

By the time I gained the arbour there was no sign of the stranger.

I returned to the house and asked for the help of the servants.

A search party was organised, but, as I had

anticipated, nothing came of it. The grounds themselves were well adapted for a hiding-place and beyond them the country was broken and woody in many places. Also, from the manner of the servants, I believed that they considered I had invented the tale for reasons of my own.

Although I felt that the vision of Marguerite might have been merely the result of weakness, it nevertheless had the effect of appealing to my emotions and making me believe that, whoever may have drugged the wine at the chateau, Marguerite was at least not aware that this had been done when she offered me the cup. That she was labouring under the stress of some great feelings, torn by conflicting emotions was certain; the explanation of this mental battle however would, I felt, be given later on.

To what extent I was deceived in this will appear hereafter. My belief stimulated me to further action, and proceeding to my own house again and selecting a couple of my most trustworthy servants I set out for the Capital, leaving instructions that enquiries were to be made constantly at Maros and any news of importance was to be transmitted to me as quickly as possible.

How events had transpired in connection with the conspiracy I knew not, but in any case the best course appeared to be obedience to the instructions of the archduchess, namely to proceed to Bremlauz and ascertain if the cause of the archduke had triumphed, and if it had, obtain his aid in the further pursuit of Marguerite as promised by Her

Highness. His servants did not know General von Graubler's reason for going there, but perhaps he had received some information which led him to adopt this plan.

CHAPTER XII

THE PROPHECY

Wrapped in reflection, and my servants following at some distance I trotted and galloped along the road towards Bremlauz.

When we were within two miles of the city I discerned someone sitting at the side of the road; this as I came closer turned out to be an aged gipsy woman whom I had known from boyhood and who had often when her hand was crossed given me supposed glimpses of the future. Her revelations however had been of such a vague nature as to leave many loopholes for escape from the accusation of inaccuracy, although upon several occasions the prophecies might have foreshadowed events which actually came to pass.

As I approached she rose and faced me. Her countenance wore a frenzied expression, which was added to by the aspect of her grey hair waving in the breeze. Her eyes bore a far-away look. The spirit of prophecy was upon her.

"Back hirelings, back!" she howled, as my servants pressed forward. "I have business with the Count Adrian that such as you were never meant to hear. Back, I say!"

At another time I would have treated her behaviour with my usual scepticism and would at

the most have laughingly agreed to humour her; but I wondered if she really possessed the gift of second sight and whether it might be of service to me now. There is much in human nature uncomprehended and there are those who are assured such powers exist, giving as reasons facts from their own experience.

I ordered my servants to go out of hearing. The old creature raised her skinny arms towards the skies.

"You have done well," she said. "You have ever been gracious. Silver has ever flowed from you to the poor."

I placed my hand to my wallet, thinking that this was a hint.

"Nay! nay! not this time, Count of Arndt. Let me show you the gratitude of the gipsy. I give my news for love of you and your forefathers

I scrutinised the face of the old hag, for I did not quite know whether to believe her. It was true I had always given her a dole, but upon the other hand I had found it necessary to check the thefts of horses by men of her tribe by having them hanged at different periods.

"Your hand, pass me your hand," she demanded in a shrill voice.

I did so, and she concentrated her gaze upon it.

"You have had a loss," she cried; "a great loss, but do not despair, keep up a brave heart and you will recover what has passed from you. But have a care; I see a queen robed in strange garments; beware of her I say! beware! she rides upon a white horse."

"Have you ever seen such in your visions?" she questioned.

"A queen upon a white horse?" I asked smiling.

"No! no! a white horse without trappings."

"Never."

Again the crone bent her head towards my hand.

"Ah! she is indeed beautiful, Count Adrian, but why did you hang your happiness upon such a rotten branch. Why marry a daughter of the stage, one who lives for admiration and the love of money. O last of the proud House of Arndt, how low hast thou fallen!"

"You are a crazy old woman," I replied; "I have no wife; I am not married."

"You lie, young sir! Why lie to me? It is your face at the altar, my eyes do not deceive me."

"Ah," she raved, "the dream changes, he comes, a conqueror, but unable to receive the adulations of her who loves him.

"Who?" I demanded.

"I cannot see, his face is covered. But what is this? What strange images are these arranged in battle order, carved in wood? knights, bishops, kings and queens of the days that have for ever passed."

"Old woman, you are mad," I exclaimed.

She flung my hand away. A fresh frenzy seemed to have taken possession of her entirely; then foaming at the mouth she placed herself before my horse with extended arms.

"Back! go back! Count of Arndt," she screamed; "I was wrong, all your courage is of no avail. You

fight with the dead. She is lost, lost to you for ever and no human aid can save her. Enter not into Bremlauz, the city is accursed and must perish. I see the soldiers; they burn and kill, there will be no mercy and amongst the slain is your own dead face. The great man who is your friend cannot save himself, how can he succour you?"

I felt her strange words more than I would have liked to own.

"Stand aside," I said, "take your hand from my bridle."

In her excitement she had grasped it. She would not heed me however and I feared that my horse would lose its temper and injure the old creature, for although an exceedingly gentle animal the gipsy's actions were sufficient to make it restive.

The wild unnatural glare still in her eyes, she recommenced to pour forth a torrent of words.

"See," she cried, pointing at some imaginary person, "what he is about to uncover. It is a canvas, Count Adrian, a painter's canvas, it is smeared with blood; a sea of blood, naught else can be observed. Well, ah well indeed for you that my eyes cannot penetrate that red film, for there is that beneath would thrill your very soul with horror. It is there, the kernel of the black mystery."

"You shall tell me," I said.

"I cannot; I do not know; it has not yet been revealed. Stay! what is this? A jewel flashes upon her neck, a diamond, and set within a pendant. She is of royal blood. Do my eyes deceive me, or is it indeed Her Royal Highness the Archduchess

of Bremlauz? I see a garden lit by the light of the moon. Figures lurk amongst the trees. There is blood upon their feet, the sound of rushing waters is in my ears, the smiles of treacherous women and the flashing of daggers are upon all hands; there are whispers low and hoarse, those of murderers."

"Enough of this," I shouted. "Let me pass, woman, or my men shall pull you from my bridle rein."

"One moment, one moment more I beg. This last scene, surely it must stay you. I see a face serenely beautiful. You know it, Count, but too well, and have trusted it. The lips are pressed to yours. Why do I tell you to beware of that fair countenance? I know not. Why should that picture affright me? I cannot say; yet there is treachery somewhere: it is not that the woman does not love the man to whom she yields her kisses. If that man is yourself, why should I feel she is false? But she is punished surely, for the scene is changed to a silent chamber; high in state there lies a white figure; tall candles shed their bright light upon black drapings. It is the chamber of death. A door opens and one approaches with weary and sad steps; it is you, Count. Nay, gaze not thus in agony upon the face of the bride that was to be; it is better thus. Yes! yes! press thy lips to those cold ones and lay the white rose of purity upon them. Farewell! farewell! for ever, dear love.

"All is again silent. Another door opens, that with the secret spring. A figure enters, masked dressed as the Count Adrian is wont to appear, but

why this disguise? He approaches the sleeping form and taking a vial from his pocket pours a little of the liquid it contains upon the lips of the seeming corpse; then watches intently.

"She stirs! Great powers! she moves and rises as though from sleep; then seeing that hideous mask seems like to faint. But words reassure her, and she clasps the neck of the masked one, who produces from his cloak a statue resembling the white horse. The eyes of the beautiful girl grow brighter with pleasure and look upward at—can it be you, Count? Seizing the head of the horse with one hand he snaps it off and reveals a glorious gem, a sparkling diamond such as the eye of man has never before seen. The woman takes and fondles it, laughing deliriously in her excess of joy. Why does the masked one think so deeply, and watch her so narrowly; his actions are those of one who hesitates to make a communication. He will speak though! Yes, he whispers something into her ear. A look of horror and agony springs into the eyes of the woman; with a quick movement she reaches forward and seizes the mask: the man makes no attempt to stop her. The face is revealed. It is yours, Count Adrian, surely; yet why does the woman throw her arms upward and with one despairing shriek sink senseless upon the bier?

"'Dead!' you say, 'dead! and I have lost her.' Your face has become that of the robbed beast of prey, but it is from Death himself you must claim your mate, the account is with him. Aye, fling the accursed jewel from you, it is well, how many lives

has it blasted? nay, take it hence and drop it into the unplumbed depths of ocean, for thus will you best guard humanity."

She ceased. What strange and horrible forecast of events was this? Could I believe them? Wild as they were there was certainly some connection between them and those that had taken place.

"Stand aside, old screech-owl," I yelled, realising dimly the meaning of the prophecy, "or I will not answer for the consequences." Causing my horse to move quickly to the side I freed the bridle rein from her grip and spurred forward.

"Then go, rash youth!" she cried after me, "but remember the warning I so freely gave, and blame me not for the doom that must befall you. I am but the mouthpiece of Fate."

The more I thought of what the gipsy had said the more I regretted the irritation which had caused me to leave her before attempting to obtain some further explanation of the prophecy. If what she said was true the conspiracy against the archduke mentioned by his wife would gain ground and his protection of myself stand for nothing. But her terms were so vague; was it his protection that was referred to? events might show that another person was involved. Who was this mysterious double destined to cross my path again and apparently ruin all my hopes? He had seemingly married someone in my name; it must have been his face the old woman had seen in her dreams. That I was utterly wrong, in this, however, will appear later.

At last the walls of Bremlauz frowned above me and I prepared to enter. I anticipated peril and disaster it is true, but had I known what was actually to occur, my entry into the ancient city would have been more miserable and gloomy than it was; for the prophecy of the witch, terrible as were the events it foreshadowed, but faintly sketched the awful experiences that were to follow.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE MYSTERY REVEALED

I approached the main gate of the Capital in a state of great excitement and awaited breathlessly the result of my first question to the officer in charge.

"Has the archduke returned?" I asked.

My joyful exclamation at the reply in the affirmative caused the man to regard me with curiosity.

The most important thing to be done appeared to be to proceed to the general and ascertain from him such facts appertaining to the abduction as he was acquainted with. His house was one of those on the left bank of, and facing the river, near the Arnan Bridge and a quarter of a mile from the palace.

The particular block on which it was situated was composed of four-storied, gabled buildings, the architectural features of which consisted of heavy wooden carvings. The buildings, although commodious, were some of the oldest in the city, a sombre and forbidding group.

The lackey informed me, to my annoyance, that Von Graubler was absent and would not return before seven o'clock that evening. I determined therefore to present myself at the palace and left

word that it was my intention to call not later than the hour mentioned.

Upon my arrival at the palace, I was informed by those in waiting, that His Highness was very pleased to hear of my return, but that events of the greatest importance required his immediate and prolonged attention, and that affairs would be concluded by eight o'clock in the evening, when I could be received.

I called at the town houses of Rudolph and Von Meinter, but the servants stated that they knew nothing of their masters' movements and had not seen them for a fortnight.

I returned to my own house, which was about a quarter of a mile from the Arnan Bridge, and waited impatiently for the time to pass.

It was scarcely seven o'clock when I arrived at the bridge, and I stood upon the banks for some minutes watching the lights of the various small craft upon the river; then turning round I was about to proceed to the house when, walking rapidly along the cobbled pavement, appeared a woman's figure which struck me as being familiar. I was not mistaken, for a slight turn of the head revealed a mask; it was the woman of the chateau.

I was about to spring forward and compel her to give me reasons for her past behaviour, when she stopped and knocked at the house to which I was bound.

It was opened, the woman admitted, and then closed again. Marguerite's guardian then knew this creature; the great mystery had again ad-

vanced one stage. My course at first appeared difficult, but upon reflection if Von Graubler and the woman were perfectly innocent of my love's abduction they would welcome my appearance and advice, if not, their disconcertion would be a proof that they were parties to the conspiracy. The fact of the woman being with Marguerite at Dannerg looked extremely black against her, but the matter was now too complicated to allow of a hasty judgment; I could be sure of nothing.

I resolved to enter and confront the pair at all costs, and walked hastily across the road.

The same lackey who had answered me in the morning appeared at the door.

"Has your master returned?" I demanded.

"No, sir."

"And the lady, who has just entered, I presume awaits his return?"

"She does, sir."

"I have some news to communicate both to her and your master," I said, "usher me into her presence."

The fellow obeyed, and in a few moments I stood in the private reception room of the general.

Was I at last to penetrate the mystery?

The woman had her back turned to the door and was regarding critically one of the many pictures on the walls. I motioned to the servant not to speak and to withdraw: he did so.

"General von Graubler," she said, as the door closed, without turning, "this Rembrant equals any I have seen."

I did not answer.

The silence puzzled her and she turned and faced me.

She was indeed a woman of strong nerves; my appearance must have given her a great shock; for an instant only her hand sought her heart, then clenched at her side, and from beneath the mask the dark eyes glittered as I had seen them at the old chateau.

I regarded her steadily, wondering by what means the required information could be best obtained from her; there appeared to be nothing better than the attack direct.

"I apologise, Madame," I said, "for this intrusion, but there are some questions you can answer that will not wait."

"You have been good enough," I continued, "to interest yourself in my affairs, embracing as they do those of the Countess Linzorf, I wish to know with what precise object. The countess has been, as you are doubtless aware, abducted. I wish to know the name of the man who did this and his reason."

At that instant the door was flung violently open and General von Graubler rushed into the room. He slammed the door and locked it.

"And now, sir," he demanded, "what am I to understand from this, upon what grounds can you explain your conduct?"

"Upon grounds," I replied, "which should be of mutual interest to us both, namely the speedy solution of the mystery which surrounds the disappearance of my fiancée."

The general's glance wandered in the direction of the masked woman and again to my face.

"And how will your present behaviour further the solution?" he questioned.

"During the last few days," I replied, "and since the events which I have seen fit to believe are connected with the abduction of Marguerite began to be enacted, this woman has crossed my path upon several occasions under most remarkable circumstances. I was captured upon the Orlau Road, near the Chateau of Dannerg, and having been conducted there was almost assassinated by her through being mistaken for another man. She rode along the Vaschauz Road on Sunday night, or parhaps it would be better to say Monday morning in the company of Count Rudolph and others."

At this point my eye caught a signal from the woman and I paused.

"Well, sir," cried the general impatiently, "you were saying—?"

I hesitated as to whether it was advisable to continue or not. I was weary of the eternal mystery however and had remained silent long enough. After all, my oath to this woman only referred to the adventure in the Chateau and was merely to the effect that I would not tell Colonel von Heiner about certain circumstances, no reference had been made to anyone else, and the conduct of the woman had been such in my opinion as to warrant my taking advantage of the loophole the flaw in her language at the mansion gave me; strict justice was due to her and nothing more. I felt that per-

haps it would be better to expose these people to each other instead of probably furthering any malicious ends of either by silence; their mutual destruction or enmity might be Marguerite's gain.

"Yes," I continued, "I was about to deal with the second occasion of my meeting with this woman, but perhaps it will be better if I give you more of the details relating to the first encounter."

I then related the whole of the extraordinary adventures which had befallen me from beginning to end, omitting only all reference to the archduchess and the conspiracy she had warned me of.

"Pardon me, Count," said the woman, when I had finished speaking, "you refer to the second meeting as having taken place upon the Vaschauz Road."

"Of course that cannot be called a meeting," I admitted, "but I was nevertheless informed of your presence by a person beyond suspicion."

"If you will allow me to advise you," said the woman, "you will trust no one in this affair."

"You insinuate, Madame, then, that you were not at Vaschauz in the company of the Count Rudolph; who then was the very tall lady?"

"There are more tall women in Austria than one and moreover I am no Diana. What do you imagine could have been my object in dashing to Vaschauz and returning to await your possible advent at the chateau, even if my strength would have permitted it. You are aware, as I am, how much of your tale is true and how much false; you

can only have one object in view and that is to deceive the general."

"I can see no reason in anything that has happened so far," I replied, "as far as the general is concerned my word stands against yours."

"And what are your intentions now, Count Adrian?" queried Von Graubler.

"To ask you the name of the lady."

"And if I refuse to give it?"

"To demand it."

"And if I still decline?"

"To compel you."

"If I am ignorant?"

"To unmask her myself."

"You dare not," the unknown said hoarsely.

"I will dare anything in the name of the woman I love."

"Believe me—" said Von Graubler.

"I do not believe you, General," I said sternly.

He stepped towards the door to call for help apparently, but I anticipated the movement and secured the key.

"Ha, you would make a prisoner of me in my own house," he hissed, pale with passion and fear.

"Unmask, Madame," I cried, advancing towards the woman.

The general drew his weapon, he was however no fencer, and in an instant I had whirled it from his hand with my own sword; it struck the wall and fell with a clatter to the floor.

"Sir," I said, "there is a long account between

us; let me beg of you not to ask for the settlement at this moment."

"I will rouse the house with my shrieks," the enraged woman panted.

"Those who come shall see your face, Madame," I replied. "Again I say, unmask."

"I will not! I will not! she raved, wringing her hands.

"Oh, General von Graubler," she cried, "are you a soldier or a timid lackey?"

He made a half movement towards me; but a glance at my countenance again assured him that he was dealing with a dangerous person; he stood an irresolute, pathetic figure.

I seized the woman's hands firmly, placed them in one of my own and removed the mask with the other.

A French acquaintance of the archduke was revealed, a particular friend of his, her eyes blazing with impotent fury and hate. I recognised her immediately, although I had only seen her once before, a few years previously at Mertz, a small town four miles from Bremlauz, where she lived in her own house. I had understood that she never appeared in Bremlauz.

"Madame du Soissons!" I ejaculated.

"Yes," was the reply, "and you shall answer for this to the archduke."

'And you also, Madame," I said; "this very evening I have an audience as it happens; we will interview him together."

She stared at me.

"But you will not do this?" she begged, all her passion gone. Abject fear reigned in its place.

"Unless you will explain the meaning of all this mystery and deliver safely into my hands, or cause to be restored to me, the Countess Linzorf, I will certainly carry out my threat."

"Oh, you are wrong, spare me, spare my life," she pleaded, "for such you are imperilling."

The general had been standing biting his nails throughout the latter part of the scene.

"Madame," he said, "will you be good enough to tell me why I was favoured with an appointment to-night? I received your letter and arranged to meet you but am still completely in ignorance as to the meaning of your presence here."

There was the ring of truth in his voice and I turned again to Madame du Soissons, just in time to catch the fleeting glimpse of a strange meaning glance which changed to a neutral smile.

"That," she said, "can await a more favourable opportunity."

"Then you have no wish to remain here any longer, Madame?" I asked.

"I am ready," she replied with dignity, and appeared to have quite recovered her equanimity.

"Then," I said, "we will proceed to the archduke's palace."

"And have you discovered no clue concerning the mystery, General?" I queried, wishing to find out if possible from his answer an explanation of the situation as far as his motives and actions were concerned.

"After your behaviour," he said brusquely. "I must request that you will allow your actions to be completely independent of mine: I have no wish to become embroiled with such enemies as your rash conduct must make."

"Very good," I answered.

We left him standing by the fireplace, apparently the incarnation of misery and discomfort. I was aware that assuming the general to be innocent, my conduct was disgraceful from his point of view; however, I consoled myself with the reflections that if in the right he would recognise, when his anger cooled, that circumstances were accountable for my conduct; if he were guilty I had nothing to reproach myself with. At least one portion of the mystery was solved now that the identity of the masked woman had been revealed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ARCHDUKE AND A LADY

As we stepped into the moonlit street I observed that Madame du Soissons had replaced the mask: either all fear had completely vanished or she was acting a part wonderfully well. She referred to laughable topics of the day, and became so animated that for the moment I forgot all serious matters and the unpleasant journey upon which we were bound.

Afterwards I distinctly remembered catching a suspicious movement, but at the time took no heed of it.

She had just completed a particularly ludicrous caricature of the archduke's chief minister, when I heard a sound resembling several people moving swiftly and silently behind us.

I turned quickly. Several men had advanced to almost within sword thrust. Their weapons gleamed in the moonlight.

I drew my sword, seizing at the same moment Madame du Soissons by the wrist. My opponents were five in number. All were closely muffled in cloaks, their hats being well drawn over their eyes. That they were not robbers was apparent from their dress.

Four advanced towards me, the fifth remaining

in the shadow; this precaution was however useless, for I had recognised in him the archduke's brother William, from his height, although he stooped to disguise it, and a peculiarity in his gait, very slight, but known to me.

"Gentlemen," I observed, watching carefully the actions of the woman who remained suspiciously passive, in view of the fact that she had doubtless been signalling to the men when making the strange movement I had observed previously, "you appear to be anxious to make my acquaintanceship."

"We are fortunate in that respect already, Count Adrian," replied one of the four in a voice I seemed to know. "We require from you merely a small favour."

"And what is that?" I queried.

"That you will allow us to escort your lady friend to her destination."

"But suppose that she objects?"

"Whatever, dear Count, may be her private desires, upon this occasion, she will be prepared to sacrifice egoism to altruism."

"There still remains another unsurmounted obstacle however," I said.

"And what is that?"

"My own unlimited selfishness; the company of this lady is at present necessary to me for my tranquillity."

"However, Count, you must admit," said the man, "the obstruction is not insuperable, the matter resolves itself into a fundamental question of natural philosophy, four are greater than one."

"Your statement," I replied, "may be based upon an erroneous assumption; apparently you consider the units in the problem equal."

My case was hopeless, but something might be gained from loss of temper and over confidence on their part.

The four advanced stealthily.

I parried a blow, touching the giver upon the forearm.

He shrank back with an oath to bind his wound.

Two of the remaining three were I saw proficient swordsmen and in a few moments the disabled man would return to the attack. There was no fear of the men striking the woman, but I had to hold her at arm's length and thus hamper my actions.

I foiled a concerted movement by the trio, escaping a thrust in the thigh by a quick side motion; the woman however, who had remained quite passive up to that moment, suddenly wrenched herself free, and springing amongst my enemies, rushed toward the man in the doorway with whom she held a low, animated conversation. There was a pause in the fight.

The wounded man finished bandaging his injury, and the four again faced me, awaiting instructions apparently from the leader.

At that moment the voice of Madame du Soissons made itself heard, and the woman herself walked quietly towards me.

"Gentleman," she said, to my opponents, "I thank you for your ready courtesy and desire to aid me, but can assure you there is a mistake. I am

quite willing to accompany Count Adrain to the destination we had previously agreed upon and wish you a very good night."

"Count," she continued, turning to me, "I am again at your service."

The men sheathed their swords and walked towards the figure in the doorway.

I offered my arm to Madame du Soissons and we continued our way as before, save that I no longer listened to the brilliant conversation of my companion, but remained lost in profound conjecture.

It occurred to me however that I might possibly by questioning madame gain some idea of the meaning of the fresh complications which had just thrust themselves upon me. There was little hope however of success as at my first words the subtle woman would see the object of the interrogation and was probably at that moment divining my thoughts. It was necessary moreover that she should not know that I recognised the archduke's brother, for the less she was acquainted with the extent of my knowledge, the more chance was there of my winning ultimately in the contest in which I was so outnumbered.

"Your friends, Madame, appear over hasty in their attentions," I ventured, "so much so that their civilities seem to clash with your desires."

I hoped to draw from her a statement or denial of some description from which I might recognise a point she did not desire me to dwell upon or the reverse.

She affected however to regard my remark as

directed at her vanity and turning laughed coquettishly.

"It is not often," I continued, "that one stumbles by chance upon one's friends; had the need been greater perhaps they would have been absent."

"Count," was the reply, "if we walk at this pace, we shall reach our destination within three minutes."

My companion still retained her mask when we arrived at the palace. It was with strange misgivings that I stated to the officials that a lady and myself awaited an audience, and when after remaining a quarter of an hour in an anteroom we were ushered into the presence of His Highness, my spirits were lower than they had been since the commencement of the strange experiences that have been recounted.

As the door closed Madame du Soissons removed her mask.

The archduke stared from one to the other with mingled looks of curiosity, jealousy and suspicion.

"Count Adrain," he remarked, "I certainly expected you, but was not aware that you would be accompanied by this lady."

"Sire," I responded, "I humbly beg that if I have committed an error in taking what appeared to be the best course, I may be forgiven."

"Explain yourself," answered the archduke, his brow contracting as his glance passed from my own harassed visage to the smiling countenance of the beautiful woman by my side. "To say the least

you do not appear to have offended Madame, for I have not seen her so amused for a long time."

He spoke truly, for the face of Madame du Soissons was radiant and from its expression I might have been conferring upon her one of the greatest pleasures in existence.

"Your Highness," I said, "what is amusement to madame is torture to me."

"I am awaiting your tale," replied the archduke, gazing abstractedly in the direction of the fire. To attempt to divine the working of the brain behind his dark immobile countenance was hopeless.

"I will recount the adventures then," I said, "which have befallen me since you interrogation in the castle dungeon."

I was right then; the archduchess was playing a double game. I had suspected it. He leaped to his feet with a stifled exclamation, then relapsed again into his previous abstracted appearance, although I could see that he was puzzling over my remark.

"My interrogation in the castle dungeon," he said; "there is surely some error."

"Why had the archduchess not communicated this fact to her husband? Would she plead forgetfulness? What could the meaning of it all be?

"Your Highness," I replied, "I informed the archduchess, that previous to her entry into my dungeon, when she entrusted me with the mission of attempting to unravel the mystery of the conspiracy now afoot, that I had been questioned by a person who, I was led to believe, was yourself. I

was awakened on Saturday night, or rather early Sunday morning, and found this individual accompanied by two others had entered whilst I slept."

"And what were these questions?" he queried.

I gave him the information.

He sat like a man in a dream.

"My wife must have forgotten this," he murmured at length; "but give me your experiences now; I know much, but wish to become conversant with the details."

I then narrated all that had befallen me from the commencement of the mystery, omitting naturally all mention of the curious behaviour of the archduchess, for the few words she had spoken were ambiguous, and it was after all possible that I had misread her expression.

The archduke fixed his piercing eyes upon the face of the woman at my side.

"And now, Madame," he said, "will you be good enough to state who these gentlemen were that were kind enough to take compassion on you in your distress?"

A mischievous smile played about the delicate mouth of the dark haired beauty and the bewitching eyes danced with suppressed merriment.

"Certainly, Sire," was the answer accompanied by a titter, "but the information must be for you alone."

The archduke stamped his foot impatiently.

"It seems to me," he muttered, "scarcely the time for jests, with two unavenged murders upon my hands, to say nothing of this diabolical con-

spiracy. Will you have the goodness, Count Adrian, to move for a few moments out of earshot."

I complied.

As I returned to my former position at his request, he said, "Count, you have no reason to fear that the conduct of Madame du Soissons is detrimental to your interests or my own. I can assure you that her presence at the house of General von Graubler was due to a special request made by myself."

"May I be pardoned one remark, Sire?" I asked.

"Speak."

"I do not understand the obvious distress of Madame du Soissons when I asked her to unmask and she was informed of my intention to take her immediately into your presence, particularly when it is compared with her present mirthful appearance. May I be acquainted with the reason for this?"

"In good time, in good time, my dear Count," was the reply. "I have much to speak to you about in private.

So saying, he escorted Madame du Soissons to the door and ordered attendants to accompany her to her destination. As she was disappearing through the doorway and about to replace the mask, which she wore in the palace apparently to formally disguise her visit, for there must have been several that knew her with it on, she shot another of those half malicious half mirthful glances from her dark eyes. What it meant I was unable to fathom; whether I had by my exposure mortally offended her or merely played into her hands was beyond my power of discernment.

I turned once more to the archduke, trusting that the riddle which haunted me was at last about to be answered.

"As the archduchess informed you," he said, seating himself in a chair by the fire, "both my dominions and myself are in grave danger. So far, I have checkmated open rebellion by prompt action. What I have still to fear however in assassination."

"There is one fact," I said, "which I did not mention in the presence of Madame du Soissons."

"And what is that?" he questioned, looking at me gravely.

"That the leader of the gang who attacked me to-night was your brother William."

The effect of my words was magical. The archduke made no attempt to disguise his emotion. He paled to the lips and grasped the arms of his chair for support.

"My brother William!" he gasped.

"Your brother, Sire; I will swear to him cloaked and muffled as he was."

From the hue of death the countenance of His Highness had turned to the crimson of terrible anger; his eyes blazed with the light of murder; he sprang to his feet and paced the room muttering to himself.

"Then this explains all! this explains all!" I caught.

"Listen, Count Adrian," he cried stopping suddenly in front of me, "as you know, that reptile, conspiracy, has raised its head. I have only been aware within the last few days that the meshes of

the plot have enveloped you and yours. If the life is not to be crushed from all of us, my family, your love and yourself, it is necessary that we should act together, that you obey me implicitly, confiding to no one, not even to my own wife, the orders that I give you. To-morrow night, as you are of course aware, I have issued invitations for a masked ball at the palace. That opportunity I have been informed by a secret agent has been chosen by my enemies to assassinate me: they shall make the attempt and be captured redhanded. Besides this trusted agent, there is only one person who is aware that I am acquainted with the knowledge which I have now imparted to you, and my determination, and that is yourself. There is much that has occurred to you which requires elucidation, for instance you probably wish to question me as to why I did not demand from Madame du Soissons an explanation concerning your attempted poisoning at the chateau. I can assure you that the reason for that crime is as unknown to her as it is to you or me; nevertheless I can promise you that before day dawns on Thursday the whole skein shall be unravelled and explanation given by the person who is acquainted with the true interpretation.

"To-morrow evening," he continued, having paused for breath, for he had spoken with great rapidly and excitement, "you have one particular duty to perform and that is to meet me in the summer house by the statue of my father in the castle grounds at twelve o'clock. You will meet probably many of your friends between this and

that time, engage them in conversation; also you will encounter those who you imagine are your enemies, some are and some are not. Do not avoid them, on the contrary converse as long as possible with every individual who appears desirous of intercourse; remember however all they say; do not attempt to divine their intentions because you will fail, leave that to me and be at the appointed spot at the exact time mentioned. That is your paramount duty, for if you fail it is certain death to us both. Fear nothing however until the hour of our meeting, save disobedience of my orders, however great the menace may appear and believe me that before the dawn breaks on Thursday, the great secret which has haunted you shall be revealed and those who seek my dominions shall be beyond the possibility of gratifying their ambitions.

"And what of Marguerite?" I asked.

"You shall judge whether she is worthy of your love."

"It is sufficient, Your Highness," I said; "I will obey your orders implicitly."

"You have not forgotten," he said warningly, "that notwithstanding the instructions of the archduchess you described what had befallen you, both to Madame du Soissons and General von Graubler.

"True," I answered, "but you will remember, Sire, that I was ordered to use my discretion."

"Very well, Count, this time it is absolute secrecy, under all circumstances concerning these events; obtain information but give none, do not

trust a living soul. On no account attack your friends Von Meinter and Rudolph whatever occurs. Attract as little attention as possible. Also, however necessary it may appear, make no communication with me by word or sign should we meet, beyond conventional expressions at the first greeting at the ball, which should be as short as possible, between this and the appointed hour of our meeting, for you may speak at the wrong moment. I lay especial stress upon this last point. Keep away in fact from my vicinity at the ball as far as possible.

"Again I say fear nothing up to the hour of our meeting, your life is at least safe until then if you obey the orders given, for your death is the last thing desired by my enemies under certain conditions. At the ball you will know your friends by the sign of a white silken bow worn outside the domino over the left shoulder: do not forget to wear one. The sign will be, 'The chateau,' and the countersign, 'The inn at Orsavo.' What will be the colour of your domino?"

"Grey, Sire," I replied.

"Then until to-morrow, Count Adrian, farewell," said His Highness.

I took my leave and was about to quit the palace when a lackey handed me a note saying that it had been brought and left by another servant in a livery unknown to him with a request that it might be given to me. Yet another strange missive. As I opened it I wondered why, if my life was not desired by my enemies, I had been shot at in the grounds of Maros. Was it to intimidate me?

CHAPTER XV

THE PROBLEM OF THE ACTRESS

It was a very short epistle, merely instructing me to go at once and sit in a certain box at the theatre close to the stage. I was told to fix my eyes intently upon the wearer of a jewel which I would doubtless recognise, the anonymous writer said, and upon no account to remove them, even though my action appeared to cause the wearer acute discomfort.

Remembering the instructions of the archduke, I decided to do as asked. Upon the way I was too dazed to think much of what had occurred at the palace; but could not help wondering again why, if my life was not desired by my enemies at present, the masked man shot at me in the grounds of Maros.

The theatre was full to overflowing. The great actress Pauline Hirsch was playing in her rôle of the "Forsaken Queen." With neither eyes nor ears for the great audience I watched impatiently for the article I had been told to look for. The second act, in the middle of which I entered, represented the king and certain of his ministers, who had conspired to alienate the monarch from his wife for political motives. No jewel attracted my attention especially. When the cur-

tain rose upon the third act however in which the queen again appeared differently attired, my astonished eyes fell upon the strange diamond pendant worn by the masked woman at the chateau of Dannerg and shown to me by the pseudo archduke in the dungeon of the castle of Bremlauz. I felt it was useless to speculate upon this fresh manifestation of the enigma which, I comforted myself with the reflection, would be solved to-morrow.

As instructed by the writer of the letter, I fixed my eyes upon Pauline, who, until the act was well advanced, did not perceive me. Suddenly however, our eyes met. A wild terror shot into hers and she clutched her throat as if choking. Then from the rear of the theatre there issued that laugh, the same mocking sound I had heard in the chateau of Dannerg. With a frightful effort the actress recovered her self possession, but throughout the whole of the play, her eyes, which I could see she attempted to keep from me, as though attracted by some powerful force, constantly sought mine, and as they did so the same terror appeared in them.

Who, then, was this woman, and why should I be an object of aversion to her? I had never seen her before and as far as I knew she had not encountered me. Surely she mistook me for someone else. Yes, it must be so, that I had a double was evident. Who was he and what were his motives? Why had I been asked to come to this place?

The play advanced, the *dénouement* was approaching; the final scene was reached in which,

placed in an apparently hopeless position by the machinations of enemies, the queen emerged by means of her own spotless virtue and subtlety of brain, triumphant. Pauline's will power however seemed to fail her, the ceaseless glare of my eyes seemed to completely absorb her attention. Her strange behaviour was forcing itself upon the other actors who exhibited signs of consternation. Eventually the supreme moment came when she was to throw herself into the arms of a repentant husband. This she did in a fainting condition. The audience filed out, aware that the actress was indisposed, but guessing nothing of the cause. I stood for a few minutes in the box contemplating the strange affair, then strolled slowly out of the theatre. At the door I was met by a man who requested that I would accompany him to the actress. I followed him and was led to the rear of the theatre where I was received by Pauline in a private room, dressed as she had been on the stage, the diamond pendant still around her neck. The same awful terror was in her eyes, and she was visibly trembling.

"Madame," I said, "I truly regret being the cause of your very great distress, but can in no way account for it." As I spoke I realised the error of letting her know my ignorance.

The woman covered her eyes with her hands as though the sight of me was unbearable.

It grieved me to cause such suffering, but my enemies were merciless and I had to save the woman I loved. Was this woman a foe? Was it

my double who was the cause of this terror? I could not suggest this to her for my instructions were to obtain information but to give none.

"Tell me," at last she gasped, "what I must do to rid myself of this persecution?"

What persecution? I was in a quandary. How could I find out what had been occurring without exposing my ignorance? Direct questioning would be fatal: however, something might give me a clue as we conversed.

"Madame," I said, "you know my requirements."

"How can I be aware of them," she retorted, "when they have never been framed?"

"Think," I replied.

"Think! I have thought, after you have disappeared year after year, until my brain seemed about to burst and I have ceased, to save my reason. My only hope has been that chance would end your existence. The house is now as you desired it should be; the old man looks after it, but will you not relieve me of the suspense of wasting even another few hours? Come with me now, why should I suffer until then, I shall be at least safe for another year.

Had my double appeared yearly upon a certain day. It seemed so, but why? Could the actress not distinguish between our voices? Were the long intervals alone accountable for this? or were they extremely alike?

"Madame," I said, "believe me I am not to blame, forces beyond my control are responsible for

this apparent brutality. To-night I hope to stand between you and the danger which threatens."

"You," she almost sobbed, "you are the danger."

"Yes, but to-night my true motives shall be revealed. I will as you request go with you; that was my intention in fact. There is something beyond my comprehension."

She looked at me, the fear still in her beautiful blue eyes.

I was determined to face the double who appeared so regularly once a year.

She retired, changed her stage garments still however retaining the pendant. We then entered her carriage and rolled off.

She kept as far away from me as possible, evidently still a victim of the most abject terror.

"I would have awaited you to-night at the house according to your last instructions," she said in low tones.

We drove through the better part of the city until the carriage stopped at the identical block in which Von Graubler lived, but at the far end and facing some houses the backs of which overlooked the river.

The actress dismissed the coachman and we entered the house, the door of which she opened herself with a key. There were no signs of any lackeys.

"You desired me," she said, "to keep only the old man and he is in the basement or rather always is at this hour."

She led me through a spacious hall into a magnificently furnished dining-room, hung with fine paintings. My eye was at once attracted by a black veil hanging over one of these. She caught my glance and shuddered.

"Forgive me," she murmured, "I could not bear the sight of it. It curdles my blood and since you told me that it was the key to everything, I felt that I could never look upon it again and asked the old man to cover it thus."

"Yes," I replied, "eager to see this clue and realising the advantage her remark gave me, "but we must uncover it for this one night. It is not necessary for you to look upon it."

I flung back the drapings. The gilded frame surrounded a canvas covered with red, a blood red.

"Bah!" I exclaimed, "how can it alarm you, a mere daub of colour?"

She moaned in reply.

"Listen, Pauline," I said.

She started and looked hard at me.

"Why Pauline now?" she enquired.

"Because I choose to," I answered, "a mere whim." Decidedly I was upon dangerous ground.

"Listen," I recommenced, "it is the necklace which troubles me."

"Troubles you," she answered with a sad smile; "am I not the owner?"

"Yes," I said at random, "but you do not always wear it."

Again her hand went to her throat as though she felt about to choke.

"Spare me," she wailed, "you are not a man, you know everything."

"Why did you part with it?" I queried, thankful to find a path that led to knowledge of some bearings of the situation.

"He demanded it."

"He. Who?"

"You are laughing at me."

"I must be absolutely certain," I said; "I can guess, but this is no ordinary affair. Who?"

"The archduke."

"Yes. You see you prevaricate. What of the woman?"

"The woman?"

"Yes. Why lie to me or do what is tantamount to it?"

"I swear I do not understand you."

"The man who had it was not the archduke or rather he was not the only one and previously it was lent to a woman."

"I myself gave the necklace to the archduke. As far as I know no woman has possessed it."

"Why did you part with it?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You shall or the persecution you fear shall continue."

"Then let it, for you know the grounds of my fear and why I refuse. If I could tell you there would be no reason for obeying you."

A *cul-de-sac* truly.

"What is at fault?" she said suddenly, "if my powers of second sight have been inadequate so far,

they will be more so now, for I am weaker than a year ago.

This then was part of the secret. Pauline's strange power was being used by my double for the watching of certain events which occurred at the same hour once a year. Her remarks however impressed me with the belief that in her waking or normal state she knew nothing of the nature of the quest.

"It is not you who are at fault," I said at random, "but so far the necessary events have not happened properly."

"But surely," she replied, there is a possibility of their occurring at closer intervals. Why prolong my agony? I was prostrated for a month after your last visit and ill for many more."

"I promise you," I replied, "that I will endeavour to make this the last occasion."

"So you have said several times before," she murmured wearily. "However, this visit is robbed of much of its terror, for I have not the anticipation of your arrival which strangely enough seems worse than your presence."

I was anxious to know more of the circumstances surrounding this strange woman, what the power of my double over her consisted of, how often he had made these yearly visits; but there seemed at first no way of obtaining the information without drawing suspicion upon myself; then I began to see that this would not be awakened as readily as I had imagined, for Pauline was so thoroughly assured of my identity that I felt any mistrust

concerning it would be the last idea to occur to her. I determined therefore to question her again.

"After all," I said, "I have not visited you a great number of times, let me see, how many is it now?"

"Five," she replied promptly as one whom the circumstances had impressed to the extent of rendering a mistake impossible.

"Yes," I answered, "you are correct."

"Still," I continued, remembering her loan of the pendant apparently against orders, "I have my grievances. You have not always obeyed instructions."

"And why pray," Pauline replied, roused to a sudden fury, "should I have done so? By what right do you claim authority over me? When we first met I was a happy careless girl, living a simple life with my poor dead brother the marquis. You suddenly reappeared and demanded my help in your affairs. I have been unable to resist you truly; but tell me however wherein your right lies?"

I shrugged my shoulders. An idea occurred to me. Was this woman's brother the Marquis de Ravanne?

"By the way," I said, "I had a discussion the other day with a person concerning the correct spelling of your brother's name."

An ironical burst of laughter on her part was checked by a sob.

"You murder a man," she said, "and are even doubtful as to how his name should be spelt."

Yes, I thought it must be so, evidently she was

under the impression that I was Colonel von Heiner. How were these mistakes to be explained?

"Nevertheless," I said imperatively, "tell me."

"R-a-v-a-n-n-e," she spelt.

A timepiece struck the quarter to twelve. Pauline shuddered violently.

"Strange," she said, "that they have not arrived, this is the first time they have failed to be punctual. Have you seen anything of them?"

"Nothing," I answered.

"Rudolph was with me at five o'clock to-day," she continued.

"Rudolph!" I stammered.

"Yes, he brought the image of the horse."

"Ha!" I replied, remembering the gipsy's prophecy. "Where is it?"

"In the room," was the answer, "where else could it be?"

"What of Von Waldeau?" I asked at a venture.

She laughed viciously and then glanced fearfully at me.

"Yes," she murmured, "what of him? He was your right hand was he not?"

"Listen," I said suddenly, "you know more than you would have me believe of my schemes."

"I know nothing of them," she replied shrinking from me and growing pallid, "but I know your friends naturally, having eyes I have seen."

"All?" I enquired.

"Well of course only such as you have chosen to show me," she answered regarding me curiously; "much as you have injured me, Colonel, I will tell

you one thing: those who appear to be your friends are not all such; for instance when you play the game with Henry——"

"The game," I said unguardedly.

"Yes! yes!" she replied impatiently, "your game of chess."

Again the prophecy of the old woman recurred to me, the knights, bishops and others that she had mentioned; was the reference to chess?"

"Of course, of course," I said. "Well?"

"Beware of the fifteenth move. If you are careful there, you must win, but it is quite as easy to lose."

The image of a horse, a game of chess with Henry, beware the fifteenth move, where was this frightful enigma to end. What were the links between these seemingly unconnected puzzles? Why was I to play a game of chess with an apparent friend who desired to win it so much?

"He is a better player than we believed then?" I hazarded.

"What has that to do with it?" Pauline replied.

I arose, my head swimming.

"Why do you," I questioned, rendered desperate by the seeming contradictions, "offer me this advice, hating and fearing me as you do?"

"You know why I do so."

"Perhaps, but let me be sure."

"Because there is one I hate and fear more than you."

"His name?" I demanded.

"You are laughing at me again."

"His name," I roared.

"My husband, Count Adrian of Ardnt."

I glared at Pauline unable to utter a sound.

Then a fearful thing transpired. The four candles on the wall suddenly went out and the room was left in utter darkness. A piercing scream issued from Pauline. There was the sound of people rushing and I was seized by powerful arms. Shriek after shriek broke from the throat of the actress, who appeared to be struggling violently with someone; these were succeeded by horrible noises: she was being strangled. I fought and wrestled with my captors, who were strong men; how many I was unable to guess. No one spoke. The choking noises which came from the direction of Pauline gradually ceased and I heard a heavy fall, followed by a low whistle.

The men who held me suddenly released their hold and twisted me around several times. I was then flung violently forward, falling, sprawling upon my chest and lay for several moments half dazed upon the floor. I sprang to my feet only to trip over a body; evidently that of Pauline. The fact of my having been turned around had made me completely lose my bearings and I crawled forward until my head came in contact with the wall. I then stood up and by means of working around this found the door. To my surprise it was not locked.

The candles in the hall were out, but I perceived a glimmer of light at the far end of the corridor and

walked towards it drawing my sword. Save for the noise made by my own footsteps there was not a sound audible. At the end of the passage a flight of stairs was disclosed which led to the basement: it was from this that the light was proceeding.

I descended and entered the kitchen to find an old man there with his eyes fixed upon the bells, they fell upon my sword and a look of alarm swept across his countenance.

"Sir," he said, rising to his feet with some difficulty, "you did not ring, how did you manage to enter?"

He watched my lips for the reply; evidently the old fellow was stone deaf.

I sprang towards a lantern which I saw hanging up and lit it. The alert eyes of the man followed me wonderingly.

"Follow me," I shouted and pointed above.

I tore madly up the stairs and along the corridor, followed by the halting footsteps of the old man, and rushed into the fateful room.

A horrible sight met my gaze. Stretched upon the floor, her face contorted beyond recognition by the agonies of her painful death, lay the once beautiful Pauline.

The pendant was missing from her neck.

I turned to find the old man at my side, his features fixed in a look of terror; he grasped my arm with trembling hands.

"Ah sir," he gasped, "who has done this? I began to fear something terrible was afoot. Let

me go, sir, let me go from this awful house: would that I had never set foot in it."

"Can you understand me if I talk to you?" I queried.

"Yes," he answered in his strange unregulated tones, "I watch your lips, I have not always been deaf."

"Who has been in the habit of frequenting this house?" I asked, hoping to get information of value from him. I felt that searching the building in the ordinary way would not enable me to discover the perpetrators of the murder, who had doubtless effected a secure retreat by this time.

"You should know, sir," he answered.

This likeness to Von Heiner, although enabling me to occupy my present position with safety, was nevertheless a disadvantage, for believing I knew all little was told me by these people.

"Yes! Yes!" I said, "but perhaps someone has entered without my knowledge; give me the names of all who have ever been to this house."

The alert eyes scanned my face narrowly, but there was not the shadow of a suspicion that he doubted my identity.

"The dead lady," he said, glancing apprehensively at the corpse, "the Count Rudolph, Baron von Meinter, Count von Waldeau, Madame du Soissons, and the Archduke himself."

"No one else?" I questioned.

"No one," the old man replied.

"You swear it."

"I swear it, sir."

I commenced to review all the circumstances connected with the crime and reflecting upon the extinguishing of the lights realized that they must have been blown out. I advanced towards the candles, relit them with the one in the lantern and examined the oak with which the walls were panelled. I discerned faint lines which might represent the joint of a tiny door about six inches square opening inwards. I then sounded the woodwork; all seemed solid behind it. I then explained what had occurred to the old man.

"Have you an axe?" I asked him.

He nodded assent.

"Then bring it," I ordered.

When he reappeared with a small one I resheathed my sword and attacked the boarding. After some few blows a bare stone wall was exposed, but I recognised that if there was any possible means of opening the stonework it must be by some mechanical arrangements inside the wall, which I examined from the doorway and found to be many feet thick.

Further questioning of the old man proved futile, and I could only gather that the people he had named came occasionally to visit the house, which he had looked after for nearly twelve months. He had been engaged by the dead woman; this agreed with her own statement. The murder had so terrified him that his wits seemed scattered. I could see that in his opinion I was undoubtedly the culprit and he believed my tale to

be a fabrication and that my attack upon the wall had been executed to hoodwink him.

Suddenly however he became more rational.

"You will be discovered, sir," he said, "have you forgotten the time? It is already long past the appointed hour, but as you are late perhaps you know the reason for their delay and have nothing to fear. I have placed the horse in the room, but how am I to account for this?" and he pointed to the dead body of Pauline.

What a fool I had been to attack the woodwork, would it lead to my undoing? I cursed my rashness.

"Let us place it behind that screen," I said, "and blow out the lights, "to-morrow we will dispose of it."

He did not demur, and having arranged matters thus, we closed the door.

He preceded me upstairs and led the way to a large room brilliantly lit by candles. Upon a table near the fireplace, in which a cheerful fire blazed, stood the image of a horse: two chairs were in close proximity. The carving which was in white marble was a perfect work of art and represented an animal that had just scented danger; the poise of the head was perfect, but a closer inspection revealed a flaw. The head had at some time been broken off and stuck on again with some substance. The defect although not very obvious was sufficient to detract materially from its value. The recollection of the old woman's vision gave it a sinister meaning for me.

"Who brought it?" I ventured.

"Madame du Soissons," was the answer.

"Was she alone?" I continued, wondering whether he or Pauline had lied.

"Yes, sir. Will you listen for the sound of the bell?"

I assented.

"I have placed the two chairs as you desired," he said, moving towards the chimney piece, upon which, having placed his hand, he pressed a spring with his forefinger. A panel at the side of the fireplace moved aside, disclosing a small room.

What had my double proposed to do?

"There will be no difficulty in seeing the tables from your spy hole, sir," continued the old man, "I have taken good care of that."

I entered the little room. The place of observation referred to was apparent. To reach it I had to mount a chair. I did so and slid back a tiny panel to find that the end of the room in which the image was situated was completely commanded.

The old man had followed me.

"I will descend," he said and watch the bell; after what has occurred it will be better that I should answer their summons as usual from below and not from above, as I have no wish to be accused of the crime.

"One moment," I answered, "it is possible that an individual representing himself to be me will arrive; if so, pretend that you do not recognise the deception and usher him in here. Let no one know I have come."

I knew that if my double presented himself there must be trouble, but judged that it would be better he should enter the secret room unprepared than with the knowledge I was there.

The old fellow answered as though my instructions were the most natural possible and as if used to situations of greater moment.

I listened to his shambling footsteps as they slowly descended to the basement; then save for the gentle roar and flicker of the fire all was quiet.

Some ten minutes later the sound of a bell reached me and the old man reascended: the front door was opened and I heard a voice; it was that of Rudolph.

I closed the secret panel.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ENIGMA OF THE STATUETTE

I was not altogether satisfied with the conduct of the old man. Why had he led the way upstairs and pressed the spring? Of course his action might be that of a well trained servitor who knew the secret of the little room, yet there was an indescribable something in his manner and the haste with which he acted that roused my suspicions. Could he have known I was not Von Heiner? If so, was he friend or enmey? I decided if possible to test him further later on.

At that moment Rudolph and Von Meinter stepped into the outer room. I with difficulty restrained myself from bursting out upon them, but remembering my instructions determined to conquer the inclination and gather all possible information.

Without speaking they advanced at once towards the image.

Rudolph uttered a cry of joy.

"It is true!" he exclaimed.

"At least the statuette has been broken," said Von Meinter, "let us trust we shall find what we seek."

"We will first secure ourselves from interruption," said the count, advancing towards the door and locking it; then with a final sweeping glance around

the apartment he again approached the image. Placing his right hand upon it he seized the head with his left and pressed down. The statuette broke at the former place of fracture. A tiny piece of paper projected from the body of the horse.

Both men appeared to be delighted.

Rudolph seized the roll and opened it. There was evidently writing upon the inside which they both perused with avidity and having completed at the same moment stared at each other in astonishment.

"Whatever happens this must never fall into his hands," said Rudolph; "I will burn it at once. Where is yours?"

I wondered who was referred to. As the count moved towards the fireplace I lost sight of him.

"Quick! the paste," he said, returning to the table and taking another note from the baron.

Von Meinter produced a small bottle with the contents of which Rudolph smeared the surface of the broken portion. Suddenly his face showed alarm and he fell into a listening attitude.

"Was that the bell?" he asked. "Place your ear at the keyhole, Von Meinter."

The baron obeyed.

To my surprise Rudolph took the opportunity of his friend's back being turned, as he walked towards the door, to take a fresh roll of paper from his pocket and insert it in the cavity which had held the former one, in lieu of that given him by the baron, which I presumed Von Meinter

thought was used. Then he replaced the head, pressing it firmly into position.

"It will be dry in five minutes," he said.

"I do not hear a sound," rejoined Von Meinter.

"It would be better to unlock the door," said Rudolph. "If she spoke the truth, and there is no reason to suspect her, he will not be here for a quarter of an hour." The two then conversed upon ordinary topics, whilst I speculated upon the fresh developments.

Suddenly Von Meinter sprang to his feet.

"If you wish to emerge from this place alive, my friend, keep calm I beg of you," said Rudolph in low tones. The baron reseated himself. After a short interval a hand fell upon the latch of the door. Both men rose slowly from their seats, Von Meinter struggling with his fear.

A man entered. It was the archduke.

His face wore a superficial calm which however a close observer could not fail to detect masked the workings of strong emotions.

"Good evening, gentlemen, for the third time," he said; "I fear I am late."

The friends bowed.

"I see the horse has arrived safely," His Highness continued.

Rudolph and Von Meinter both turned towards it, the latter trembling with fear. The keen eyes of the archduke fell upon him; they could not fail to notice his perturbation.

"I have something to tell you," His Highness

continued, "which will astonish you; that image contains the clue to the mystery."

The men turned and faced him with affected amazement.

"That image?" echoed Rudolph.

"Yes, you will soon understand."

Taking the horse in his hand, the archduke snapped off the head as Rudolph had done, and placing it on the table extracted the missive placed in the body by the Count and read it.

A cry of astonishment broke from him in his turn.

"See," he cried, turning the paper towards the friends. "Count Adrian of Arndt is the man."

"Is there no appeal from this verdict?" questioned Rudolph.

"None, unless the image has been tampered with," replied His Highness, with a searching glance at his companions.

"That of course is possible," answered Rudolph, with superlative cunning.

"Yes, but highly improbable," said His Highness. "Only two people knew the secret of the contents of that statuette, the sender and myself. There is another strange feature in connection with the circumstances: the sender was the accused, Count Adrian himself."

Rudolph was a bold man, but he was unable to express a barely perceptible start at the words and perhaps the ring of irony in the voice that conveyed them.

Did the archduke notice this? He gave no sign.

"There is something quite impossible in the whole situation," said Rudolph, "the facts clash. Decidedly the image has been tampered with. Adrian would not accuse himself."

"And now with regard to Madame du Soissons," said His Highness.

"She is under the circumstances just disclosed, a traitress," answered Rudolph.

"What proof have you?" questioned the archduke.

"I have just left her with Count Adrian, she will come from him to us."

The blood rushed to my head, my hand grasped the hilt of my sword, but I knew that the best course was to obey the instructions I had received; premature action might mean the breaking of the net in which His Highness meant to make his haul of conspirators and many might escape. I again conquered my inclinations.

The archduke glanced at his watch.

"Madame du Soissons is overdue," he said. "Ah, there is the bell!"

No one spoke for some minutes. Then the archduke stamped his foot impatiently.

"Why does she delay?" he muttered and advanced to the door. At that moment it was opened by the masked woman, Madame du Soissons herself. She tottered into the room and would have fallen had the archduke not caught her. Then with an effort she freed herself, tore the mask from her face, walked unsteadily towards a chair in which she seated herself and grasped the arms tightly.

"Lock that door!" she said at last in a hoarse voice.

His Highness obeyed.

Madame still continued to shake like a leaf and it was some moments before she was able to gasp out, "We have been outwitted and overmatched."

"By whom?" demanded the archduke, "where is Pauline?"

"Dead! strangled!" almost shrieked the Frenchwoman. "She lies in the dining-room below.

"Explain!" said His Highness in a low voice.

"I can explain nothing," replied Madame du Soissons. "Whilst going into the dining-room to look for a glove I left behind on my last visit, I noticed that the paneling had been hacked by someone, behind the candles opposite the large mirror. Turning suddenly to the old man for an explanation I observed his eyes fixed upon the large screen, with a strange look of apprehension in them. My suspicions aroused and fighting against nervousness I moved towards and looked behind it: there lay the body of Pauline, the features contorted so much as to render the fact almost unrecognisable and," here her voice became very indistinct, "*the pendant was missing.* I came straight to you."

Without a word the archduke sprang towards the door, followed by Rudolph and Von Meinter.

To my astonishment no sooner had the men time to reach the bottom of the stairs, than all trace of fear left the countenance of the Frenchwoman. She rose and with swift and panther-like movements seized the image, examined it closely, then advanced

towards me and placing her mouth to the orifice whispered, "Is all well, Colonel?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You have done splendidly."

For fear of committing myself I said nothing.

"Leave the image on the table," she continued, "the carriage will be waiting at the door. So far there is not a vestige of suspicion and if you play a bold hand nothing can save the archduke. His brother has arrived but he counts as nothing. The only man we have to guard ourselves against is Adrian of Arndt and he is completely in the dark, and will if you are careful be so until his existence is no longer necessary. They are coming back," said the execrable creature returning to her seat and assuming the appearance of a person still suffering from the effects of a shock.

The men entered.

"We have been indeed outwitted so far," said His Highness, "but it is a point of relatively small importance, much as I regret the untimely end of the poor girl. The old man too has fled, we can see no signs of him."

"He is afraid perhaps that we shall accuse him of the crime," replied Madame.

"This man Von Heiner is the devil himself," said Rudolph. "He promised to astonish us and to-night has done so. However, the Count of Arndt is his match and one must be played off against the other; so far the honours rest with them. As we have received the required information, I presume, Sire, we may take our leave."

"Yes, there is nothing to detain you," replied His Highness; "there is no need to remind you of the ball."

Making their obeisances, the count and the baron withdrew.

The archduke crept out of the room and returned after a short interval; he had probably been assuring himself of the departure of the two friends.

"And now, Madame," he said, locking the door and folding his arms, "I demand an explanation."

"You shall have it, Sire," was the reply, "the men who are just gone are traitors."

"Indeed, and your reasons."

"They left the presence of your brother to come here."

A strange smile played upon the countenance of His Highness.

The woman scrutinised it impatiently.

"You are laughing at me," she said.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that they had just accused you of being an enemy of mine?"

"I should reply, Sire, that I might have expected it. Part of their policy is to throw suspicion on me, but has nothing occurred to-night to make you distrust Count Rudolph?"

"Perhaps," was the answer.

"Can you not trust me?"

The archduke mused. "It is necessary to rely on someone I suppose," he observed; "the fact is I received a message in that broken image of

a horse; it is however so at variance with facts within my certain knowledge that I cannot believe it. I suspect Count Rudolph of having tampered with it previous to my arrival, no one else but the old man could have done so and he—well you know the poor idiot. But why do you ask?"

"Can you not tell me the nature of the message?" queried the woman, evading the last interrogation of His Highness.

"I cannot."

"Shall I inform you?"

The archduke's face assumed a look of savage wonderment.

"It ends with, the Count of Arndt is the accused. You wonder how I know this. Von Meinter informed me, who received the information from that most trustworthy friend of your brother's: he overheard the plot."

My head swam again; the machinations of this infernal plotting and counter plotting stupefied me. I required the thread; without it all seemed chaotic. Evidently the archduke's brother was scheming against him, but there was something beneath this. It seemed to me that both the brother and myself were being made use of to further the mysterious ends of Von Heiner. All seemed fighting against all, each person appeared to be desirous of deluding the other. Was Von Heiner however, like myself, being wrongfully accused? Was my presence here due to the colonel himself? How far had my witnessing these events been chance and how far design? What had the

man who sent me here intended or thought would happen to me? I could give these questions no answer.

The archduke was again musing profoundly, his face turned towards the ground; the woman appeared to be doing her utmost to divine his feelings.

"Very well," said His Highness at length, "we will proceed to Von Graubler's."

Madame gave no answer.

"Are you ready?" questioned the archduke.

"I will follow if I may be allowed to," was the reply.

"Why this alteration of arrangements?"

"I have an appointment."

"Where?"

"In this house."

"With whom?"

"With Theresa."

"But surely," said His Highness, "this arrangement cannot take precedence of our plans."

"It does not; as a matter of fact my object is to further them if allowed."

"You wish to give me no information on the subject it appears."

"So far I have none to impart but hope to be in a position to do so later."

Again His Highness shot a keen glance at Madame du Soissons.

She laughed lightly and murmured, "You do mistrust me, Sire."

"No! no!" he answered, "but you will admit your conduct is very remarkable."

"Not more so than circumstances warrant."

He shrugged his shoulders and murmuring, "As you will," withdrew.

Madame du Soissons followed him, apparently to make sure in her turn of his departure and then re-entered the room.

"Colonel von Heiner," she called, smiling radiantly, at last we are alone, "Come, there is no fear of interruption."

My heart beat furiously. What fresh complications were about to arise? Who did this woman expect to see? She was aware the man I had met on the road at the Herlarz junction and who had represented himself to be Von Heiner was dead. Did she expect to see a Von Heiner who resembled myself or would my appearance cause her the greatest consternation? Unfortunately I had replied to her question and she was aware of my concealment behind the fireplace; however she probably knew the secret of the spring and would in any case be suspicious if I refused to come out.

Anxious to watch the effect, I opened the panel and stepped out.

The entrancing smile remained upon the dark beautiful countenance, nay increased; Madame du Siossons advanced, her face glowing with love, and laying her hands upon my shoulders kissed me fervently upon the lips.

"Ah, dearest, she murmured," we meet at last. This after the scene at the ruined chateau of Dannerg!

"Why such coldness?" she questioned, "it is not deserved."

Necessity demanded it, and I returned her embrace with warmth.

"I have no time to lose," she continued. "It is imperative for me to walk to his house and fetch him earlier. The coach is at the corner of the street, on the right as you leave the house. If you go in a quarter of an hour from now you will arrive about ten minutes after me; that will suffice. As I said leave the image on the table. I fear the archduke is suspicious of my statement that I had an appointment here but he cannot afford to delay. *Au revoir*, dear love," she whispered, and holding me again in a parting embrace and smiling sweetly in the doorway she left me wondering. I heard the front door close after her.

A coach was waiting then for me; my adventures, remarkable as they had been, were not yet over. To speculate was idle, but I could glean fresh facts by exploring the house perhaps. Taking a lighted candle I commenced my investigations. The building was only two stories high, for I could see no sign of an upper staircase. Five doors abutted on to the single corridor; the one through which I left the room stood at the end and apparently overlooked the street in front of the building.

I opened the first on my left. Evidently it had been occupied by a man, for there were several pairs of large boots and a hat which last I recognised as that of Rudolph's. There was a solitary canvas upon the wall and that was similar

to the one I had observed in the dining-room and for which poor Pauline had expressed such a loathing.

I left this room and entered the one next to it. A similar remarkable canvas hung upon the wall facing the door. There was a snuff box upon the dressing table; it bore the arms of Von Waldeau. With a shiver I left and entered the room opposite. It was furnished but bore no traces of an occupant: a blood red canvas decorated the wall. The last room was quite empty.

The only rooms furnished downstairs were that referred to as the dining-room, one in the basement which had apparently been occupied by the old man, and the kitchen.

Thus the search of the house yielded little or no information and merely increased the puzzle; for what possible connection could there be between all that had occurred and the canvases painted blood red?

The end of my search synchonized with the time for my departure. Before leaving the silent house I peered behind the screen in the dining-room. The body of Pauline had disappeared.

The carriage was waiting at the corner. Without a word to the coachman I stepped into it, thinking and rightly that he must have his instructions. We drove slowly for some time, then the horses were suddenly lashed up as though the driver had to arrive at the destination before a certain time and had underestimated the distance.

At the corner of a quiet street the carriage came

to a standstill. I was about to put my head out of the window to ascertain the cause when I became aware of the fact that a woman closely muffled stood at the door.

"Are you Colonel von Heiner?" she enquired.

I stated that I was.

Without another word she seized the handle, opened the door, closed it before I could aid her, and seated herself. The vehicle was then drawn forward at a slow pace.

"Where is the image?" she suddenly said in a loud voice.

"I left it at the house," I said truthfully.

"You fool!" she shouted, "you will ruin all."

I made no reply to this, judging that silence was my best policy.

"You know as well as I do that the express commands of the emperor were that it should be returned to him."

Then my senses were startled by a quick change in her manner.

"Count Adrian," she breathed in a quick whisper," I am the archduchess and have disguised myself and my voice so far. What I wish to say in private I will intersperse between my other remarks."

Then returning to her original manner, she said aloud. "This horse must be recovered at any cost, what do you propose?"

"You remember the question I asked you at the Inn of Vaschauz. Do you still believe in the love of Marguerite?" she whispered.

"Nothing has occurred to make me doubt it," I whispered back. "I have been the victim of extraordinary circumstances and possibly she has been."

"Well, Colonel," she said. "You make no reply, some plan must be formed, the statuette must be recovered."

"In asking these private questions," she whispered, "I am risking my life. I place you on your honour never to speak of it. More is unnecessary, for I know you. Put that wretched girl from your mind for ever and I will save you, promise me," she pleaded.

I felt the necessity for duplicity keenly.

"I refuse," I whispered.

"I will return later," I said in a loud voice, "and attempt to force an entrance, for I have no key."

"Very good," she replied, "I will do my best to get possession of it. In order to save time, should I have succeeded you will find a chalk mark upon the front door in the form of a cross. Since you have been so careless let me remind you of one thing: do not forget that the only differences, between yourself and Count Adrian are in the profile of the nose and chin and that it is necessary for you to face certain people as much as possible, for some of them are possessed of keen powers of observation."

The coach rumbled on slowly through the moonlight as I reflected upon all that the archduchess had said. Supposing I pretended to fall in with this woman's views of Marguerite and agreed to cast her from my mind, would I by so doing gather

more concerning the mystery? No. I dare not do it, for if the archduke ever discovered a hint of even pretended love-making I knew that the life of my loved one and myself would not be worth a moment's purchase, for of all things the honour of their race was dear to his family and I began to think that after all I had made no mistake in the emotion I had witnessed at the Inn at Vaschauz.

We were approaching the environment of the palace and were passing beneath an avenue of trees that plunged us in funereal blackness.

A sigh escaped my companion. This was followed by a sharp order to halt given by someone outside the coach. The driver lashed up his horses which were however hurled backwards apparently by men who had seized the reins. A faint scream issued from Her Highness.

The door was suddenly flung open.

I made no attempt at frustrating anything that might occur, being completely ignorant of the proper course of action.

"Madame," said a low voice, "all is well."

The speaker was the Captain of the Guard.

The archduchess rose and left the coach, the door was slammed to and the horses moved forward at a walking pace until we reached the moonlight again. They were then driven furiously.

Was the archduchess fighting for or against her husband in this subtle game? It seemed impossible to guess. Was her hinted love for me a pretence or did she believe me to be a conspirator against the archduke and hope to obtain some secrets by appeal-

ing to my vanity, or was she endeavouring to aid the enemies of her husband by these means? Was she cognisant of the frightful crimes that had been perpetrated or was she merely a blind puppet? These and numerous other points were completely beyond my logic.

The most peculiar feature of the whole mystery had been again accentuated, namely the fact that I, the focus of the affair, was apparently the most puzzled person of all. Every other individual had some plan in view which he or she thoroughly comprehended, whilst I could not grasp the meaning of a solitary circumstance. The only comfort was that my life was safe until the meeting at the summer house, at least so the archduke imagined. Suppose, however, my confidence in his plans was misplaced; plotting and counter plotting of such a marvellous nature was proceeding that I might be forgiven if I doubted the ability of one brain to make absolutely sure of the *denouement*. However, with the life of the woman I loved at stake, there was no choice but complete abandonment to the winds of circumstances.

We had by this time driven around the palace and to my further bewilderment commenced returning over the same ground the coach had just traversed. We passed through the dark avenue again, this time without any adventure. The moonlit streets were quite deserted as we swept along; the watch as usual was nowhere to be seen. I wondered what any citizens who chanced to be awake thought of the breakneck speed which the

horses had now developed. At last we shot into full view of the river; upon the bridge gazing down into the water stood a man. A long, shrill whistle issued from my coachman; the person upon the bridge replied with a similar sound, then turned and became absorbed in the contemplation of the silver stream.

Were we about to drive up to the house I had recently left? It certainly looked extremely like it. But the pace of the horses was not slackened one iota and we passed it at fearful speed, but an instant later it was checked, gradually slowing down until the vehicle was pulled up with a jerk in front of the end house of the next row, some five hundred feet only from that I had last left, and in which had occurred the murder of Pauline.

Why had I been taken upon this extraordinary excursion? That the intention was to deceive someone was apparent, but whom? Certainly not myself.

I had caught a fleeting glimpse of Von Graubler's place as we passed. It was brilliantly lit from top to bottom: he usually retired early and his parsimony allowed small expenditure upon such items as lighting.

"This is the house, sir," said a voice I appeared not only to recognise but to have heard quite recently.

I opened the door of the coach, alighted and scanned this individual, he was closely muffled and appeared slightly disconcerted by my scrutiny.

"I shall await you, sir," he continued, "at the same place."

Again that voice. Yes, I had certainly heard it quite lately, but where? The man too, I could swear was a bigger fellow than the one who occupied the box when I had started.

"Very well," I assented, and turned towards the door.

As I knocked, a whistle blown at the end of the street attracted my attention ; it was seemingly the man who had stood upon the bridge. The coachman replied, and the horses trotted off towards him and the place agreed upon.

The house was closely shuttered but from within there came the sound of voices raised in loud altercation.

My summons was answered almost instantaneously. As the door was opening, like a flash came upon me the recollection of where I had heard the coachman's voice. It was that of the old man who had been at Pauline's house: the driver and he were one.

CHAPTER XVII

A DUEL BETWEEN WOMEN

The opening door revealed the beautiful form of Madame du Soissons. Her face was contorted by rage.

"You are late," she muttered in a low voice. "Why did you stay so long? Are all women the same to you? Does the presence of one afford as much pleasure as another? I wonder if I can trust you even now. What was his message to me? Will he come?"

I saw at a glance that this woman's plans had been baffled. She had intended me to go to some place or see some particular person: evidently the coachman who was to take me there had been seized in the scuffle at the avenue and replaced by another: the archduchess had sent no communication. Was it best for me to tell her what had occurred or not? Apparently not, for if I could persuade her to imagine her schemes had succeeded there was more chance of the remainder of them going astray. It seemed that my action either way did not concern the individual who had frustrated the design: he appeared sure of his ground.

Deciding therefore to keep her as much in ignorance as possible, I answered, "There was no message for you, Madame."

"No message," she hissed, her face changing

from the manifestation of wrath to that of fear. "You are sure?"

"There was none."

"Then why this delay?"

"It was the coachman's fault, he practically walked the horses."

"He shall be flogged, the rogue. There is no time to spare then, follow me quickly," she said, walking with a swaying movement. Excitement was evidently having a terrible effect upon her nerves as upon mine.

I did as she requested, a numbed sensation taking possession of my skull.

Madame led the way up a richly carpeted staircase and opened a door from which a brilliant flood of light streamed out. The room was occupied by three other women.

Was I in the presence once more of the terrible four at whose hands I had fared so badly in the Castle of Dannerg? It certainly appeared to be so. But why were they all now unmasked?

"Will you allow me to present to you, ladies," said Madame du Soissons turning to two out of the three, "Colonel von Heiner?" Maria represents Theresa, Colonel."

I bowed. These women had been thirsting for my blood. Now they smiled graciously.

"There is no time to lose, ladies," observed the Frenchwoman.

The women spoken to advanced towards two different corners of the room. In each there reposed a rapier.

They handed one to Madame du Soissons, the other to the woman to whom I had not been introduced.

Were these two about to fight? And if so, why? Both threw looks of ineffable tenderness in my direction.

The foremost point in this new problem was the conduct of Madame du Soissons, for in addition to the hatred expressed by her at Dannerg for Von Heiner she had afterwards seen the individual I had since been led to believe was the colonel and who was totally unlike myself. When had she been undeceived? Also if the real Von Heiner resembled me, when had she fallen in love with him? Had the women been pretending to hate him at the old chateau or were they acting an opposite part now?

Suddenly my eye was attracted by a familiar object: facing me upon the wall was the blood coloured canvas.

I uttered an exclamation.

The eyes of the four women followed the direction of mine. They exchanged glances.

The strange uncanny object with the sinister circumstances already attached to it, contrasting as it did so greatly with the beautifully furnished room riveted my gaze.

"Surely, Colonel," said Madame du Soissons, "there is something more calculated to attract your attention than that morbid canvas."

I did not reply, but turned my eyes from it to them.

"Are you ready, ladies?" said one of the seconds.

"We are," was the reply.

"Then proceed," came the command.

The clash of steel rang out.

In the last glance of Madame du Soissons an ominous something led me to anticipate what actually occurred later.

Notwithstanding my theory that this affair might be arranged to deceive Colonel von Heiner there was nothing to warrant such an idea. To all intents and purposes a desperate duel was about to be fought for the sake of this man by jealous women. I based my reasoning merely upon my previous experiences.

They were both accomplished swordswomen and engaged with a fury that was positively alarming and threatened to put a sudden end to the proceedings. Madame du Soissons however seemed to fight as though intoxicated. Suddenly, she sprang backwards and gave a cry, her sword dropped from her hand and she would have fallen if I had not caught her.

Her opponent laughed bitterly.

"The woman of iron has fainted," she said.

It was true, or appeared to be.

My suspicions were beginning to be confirmed. I had thought from Madame's last glance this would happen, the only question was whether she acted that look or not.

"I claim the victory," said Theresa in an exultant voice, "the first one placed out of action was to lose, physical weakness is as great a defeat as lack of

skill, for she is entirely at my mercy now and if I wished to kill her I could do so.

The seconds consulted.

"We agree with you," was their almost instantaneous verdict.

I laid madame upon a couch. Was it fancy or did I detect the flutter of an eyelid?

The women gathered round the Frenchwoman administering some restoratives; she appeared to revive slowly. A few minutes later she sat up and gazed in a vacant manner around her. Her senses seemed to gradually come back and the situation to dawn upon her, for bursting into tears she gave me one glance and hurriedly left the room. The seconds followed, whether to console her or to leave me alone with the victor I was unable to say.

For some moments neither of us spoke, then Theresa said, "Such is the woman you admire."

I looked at her.

What was expected of me by this Amazon? My position was growing rapidly more and more difficult. Death of course I feared not but my desire now was to keep up the deception which had been thrust upon me as long as possible. A false step, a word too much might prevent my gaining knowledge material to the safety of Marguerite and my own later.

The woman who confronted me was undeniably lovely; a blonde perfect of form and face, a contrast indeed to the dark-eyed Frenchwoman.

"You are silent," she said, "and of course regret the result. I might have expected it."

The first thing necessary was undoubtedly to attempt to make sure of the love of this woman. If she were not acting a part also it was easy, or rather a thing accomplished. If she were an enemy of Von Heiner through jealousy, I might by keeping up the rôle win her affection and gain much knowledge.

"On the contrary," I replied, "I am more than satisfied."

She started and the lids closed over the light steel coloured eyes for a fraction of a second.

"Believe me," I said advancing, "I appreciate the honour you have done me fully, you are not aware of the causes which have decided my actions hitherto."

Again the bright eyes peered through their long lashes and I thought a tear trembled in them.

"Why do you say this, Colonel?"

"Because, Theresa, it is the truth that I love you.'

"Ah! If I only dared believe you."

"How can I prove it?"

"Yes! Yes! How can you prove it or rather how can I prove you? The happiness of my life-time rests in the balance. I would give my very soul for the power of divination at this moment."

Had I been right and were these women still seeking vengeance upon Von Heiner? Had this one fallen in love with him and was she hesitating as to whether she should save him. If so how did they propose now to kill him? I felt that Theresa's passion for the mysterious man would prove a

powerful weapon for the defence of my loved one. The colonel, villain as he was, must fight his own battle.

Theresa was subjecting me to a rigid scrutiny, something was puzzling her I saw.

"You still doubt me?" I asked.

"Do you wonder? Think of your history."

"Such of my life as I consider worth remembering only commenced, love, when we first met," I replied.

"If I could only think so," she murmured.

I laid one hand upon her arm.

She trembled as though afraid of me, and closed her eyes for an instant; when they reopened there was that in them that made me regret deeply the part I was playing.

"Ah, William! William!" she whispered.

"My love," I said, placing one arm around her and looking with all the earnestness I could command into her eyes. The excitement that she believed under which I was labouring and to be due to the events then proceeding rendered my acting perfect. Her eyes again closed as she yielded once more to the rapture of the moment.

Decidedly I thought this Von Heiner is a dangerous individual and has great power over women.

"You wish a proof," I continued, "of my devotion."

"Oh give me one," she wailed, gazing at me languorously through those sweeping lashes.

"The greatest," I murmured, "that a man can give. Will you be my bride to-morrow?"

A cry of intense joy broke from the lovely girl. She clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"My love! my love!" she breathed.

I kissed her. Her lips sought mine as the iron responds to the magnet. Again as the proof of this woman's great love was forced upon me did I regret the miserable part I was playing; yet the life of my dear one was at stake and the fate of a sovereign's dominions. I also had suffered. What did I know of Theresa or the crimes she had possibly committed? I was certain now that she was one of the four who had caused me such mental agony at Dannerg, for one thing I recollected her voice. There was, however, so much that was absolutely incomprehensible.

"But we must be quick! quick! Plans must be formed at once," she said, changing from her loving mood to that of the savage tigress preparing to defend her mate in danger. "You are menaced from several sources. Oh! that I had only known this before, dared to dream that it could be so."

"The ceremony can be performed to-morrow morning, at the Church of St. Thomas at ten o'clock," I said, thinking of the first that entered my head. "I can easily arrange about the priest."

"Before nightfall we must be forty miles from the capital; there must be no question of capture," she answered.

"Trust me with all," I responded. "We will ride straight from the church."

"And you will wear your former disguise."

"Yes."

"I will adopt the same plan. And now my love until to-morrow, farewell." And again I was the unwilling recipient of her caresses.

"I will tell them the news they expect," she said, summoning her friends by pulling a bell rope.

In a few moments the two seconds entered, pale and anxious looking.

"He refuses," said Theresa.

"Very well, he knows the alternative."

"Has the archduke arrived?" questioned Theresa.

The words were like the falling of a bomb. The archduke! had I all this time been confounding his plans or aiding him? If he had expected me to meet him under such extraordinary conditions, why had he not warned me?

"Yes, he is below," said one of the seconds, and awaits with the count the decision."

"You are of the same mind then?" questioned the other second.

"Exactly and always shall be."

"Believe me," was the reply, "you may at least have cause to repent it."

I turned with an impassive countenance, hardly knowing which emotion to display.

The women left.

"Have courage, my love. Oh, have courage," whispered Theresa. "If you die I will not survive you, but all will be well."

There were footsteps upon the stairs. Did the archduke expect to see me? If not, what a shock

my presence would give him. Was there no means of conveying a warning, for if he showed any surprise it might mean ruin; I could think of nothing. The inexplicable enigma was unsettling my reason, a horrible sense of unreality, the sign of the strain, seized me, but I conquered it.

The footsteps drew closer. I recognised the foremost; their owner appeared. I was again face to face with the Archduke of Bremlauz.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TORTURE CHAMBER

"Ah, Colonel von Heiner. I am pleased to meet you again," he said.

Did he not recognise me, or was he pretending not to? Was this Von Heiner so much like me then that the archduke himself, who had known me from boyhood, was deceived? Had he been outgeneralled in some way? Possibly, but at the battle of Leinberg, my respect for him when the day was apparently against him, and he turned seeming reverse into victory, had been such, that I felt whatever occurred it was my duty to carry out his instructions and make no sign. One word from me at that moment, I knew, might destroy us both.

Two faces appeared behind His Highness, those of Rudolph and Madame du Soissons.

What possible connection could the archduke have with the scene that had just passed? Was this a chance arrival of his or was it part of the general counterplot?

"I am informed that you refuse to carry out your share of the bargain. Is this correct?" questioned His Highness.

"I have been compelled to do so," I answered.

"What are your reasons, Colonel von Heiner?"

Even he had not recognised my voice apparently: did that so resemble my double's?

Was it likely that the archduke of all people had connived at a possible marriage between Madame du Soissons and the colonel? The idea was preposterous in the face of presistent rumours. However, had that lady been the victor in the contest I had witnessed, it seemed to me, from what I had heard, that such must have been the sequence.

"They are a secret Sire," I replied.

"You are aware of the decision of the emperor in this matter?"

This then was the explanation. His Highness' hand was being forced by a greater power than his own.

"I am fully aware of it, Sire," I answered.

The archduke stood for a few moments with folded arms and head bent towards the floor.

Suddenly he said abruptly, "I wish to speak a few words to Colonel von Heiner alone."

My chance of communicating with him had come then. I could ascertain whether or no he was really confusing me with another man. My face must have given him some warning of my intention, for without the slightest alteration of feature or noticeable movement of the lips he breathed towards me the words, "Fool, we are watched!"

He knew me then.

"Listen, Colonel von Heiner," he said aloud, "the blow is to be struck at midnight during the ball, the Count of Arndt is a proven traitor and I

thank you for the information which has enabled me to save my dominion. I fully understand your rejection of the commands of the Emperor and appreciate the masterly strategy which is confounding my enemies. They cannot possibly guess that the Count of Arndt has been seized, as letters continue to reach them from him. With the information at your disposal you can successfully impersonate him for a few hours longer, especially with the aid I shall render you."

"I follow, Sire," I answered, in reality too dazed to even think. When would some ray of light penetrate the awful blackness of this brain withering enigma?

"And now," continued His Highness, "with regard to the image, it awaits us at the house of Pauline; if you will precede us there, Count Rudolph and myself will follow, there will be less chance of discovery then. We will now call our dear friends and allies," he said smiling.

At the summons the Count Rudolph only appeared.

"Where are the others?" enquired His Highness.

"They have left, Sire," replied the count.

The archduke gave me a significant look.

"You are sure Count Adrian is safe?" questioned the archduke of Rudolph.

"I saw him myself an hour ago."

"I beg, Count, that you will visit his dungeon every hour," said His Highness. "Our enemies to the best of my knowledge know nothing of this change of prisoners, but they are many and should

they become acquainted with the deception before the ball all would be lost. I must catch them red-handed or my trouble will go for nothing, perhaps even, I shall fall a victim to their ambitions."

"Your instructions shall be obeyed, Sire," replied the Count.

"Then hand the key of Pauline's house to Von Heiner and let him set out at once; there is no time to lose."

I took it from Rudolph and descending the staircase left the house.

My brain again found strength to allow of a glimmering of the truth to manifest itself. This Colonel von Heiner was a would-be assassin and in the power of the archduke. His Highness wanted his enemies to think he was still at large; but why had he neglected to tell me the details at the palace? possibly the situation had developed largely since then; this was the only fitting explanation.

A few rapid strides brought me to the house of Pauline. I saw that the coach still waited at the appointed place. A figure crouched in the doorway. It was that of the archduchess.

"I have brought you a key," she said. "I have several times tried to compel myself to enter the house but could not succeed. The experiences of last night have taken away my nerve completely. Secure the image and before entering the coach call at Von Graubler's in order to obtain any information possible. Be careful, for mercy's sake, or we are lost."

"Of what use is the image now?" I questioned.

"Of what use?" she echoed. "Why your reason is leaving you."

"It is," I said, and felt that my statement was but too true.

"You will not fail us?" she said beseechingly, "you cannot at this moment. Bring me the image I beg of you!"

Accustomed as I was by this time to criticise the actions of everyone, I could not fail to observe that Her Highness' remarks were made in a far too unnecessarily loud tone of voice to be merely intended for my ears. Undoubtedly they were for someone else's benefit. Her acting was extremely bad. The only question was however, who this person could be that she was attempting to deceive.

"I will bring the statue at once," I replied, "if you will come in and allow me to close the door, Your Highness."

"I dare not cross that doorstep, Colonel, but will wait here."

"Very well," I said, and leaving it ajar ascended the staircase to the room in which the image had been. How was I to account for the damage?

The room was as I had left it save that the statue was once more in a state of repair. Could my memory have deceived me and had one of the party mended it before leaving? No, I was sure that was not the case. However, as long as I recollected the circumstance it did not concern me at the present juncture. Taking up the horse, I

carried it down and placed it in the hands of the archduchess.

"I beg that you will be more careful, Colonel," she said in the same loud voice, "for you might ruin all. Remember now that when it is required to be produced to-morrow in the Council Chamber, all that is necessary is to remark, 'I had the one final proof to submit to His Highness but have been unfortunately robbed of it.' Leave the rest to us. Good-night."

As she left me, two men who had been hidden upon the opposite side of the street, some little distance down, walked towards and joined her. They were evidently her escorts.

Closing the door I decided to await in the hall, sitting upon an ancient oak chair, the advent of the archduke; but the sound of a footfall and strange noises above, reached my ears and I cautiously reascended the stairs. As I reached the corridor the low sobbing of a woman issued from the room in which the image had been.

I entered. My eyes fell upon an alarming apparition. A woman sat at the table from which I had recently taken the horse, her face buried in her hands, dressed to all appearances exactly as Pauline had been before her murder. She raised her head. Had a miracle been performed? Was I in the presence of a wraith? The woman before me was the actress, Pauline.

"Then who was murdered?" I gasped unguardedly.

"Murdered?" she cried.

I realised my error too late.

"Tell me," she begged. "Has murder been committed? Oh why did I enter upon this thing? But you are joking?" she questioned.

This woman had been seized then and another murdered in her place without her knowledge, for there was no question about the poor creature I had seen being dead. It was the intention of the assassins to deceive somebody, but whom? Had the men who committed the deed imagined me to be Von Heiner or Count Arndt? At all events they had not intended to deceive me as representing either character.

"I thought when you were seized they had murdered you," I said.

"Your words did not convey that idea," she answered, "I understood you to infer that someone was killed and you thought it was I."

"Pardon me, Pauline," I said, "I was musing of other things at the time the remark was made."

"What was the meaning then of the terrible ordeal to which I have been subjected? How can you as a man allow a woman to run the risk of being subjected to such cruel treatment?"

Ought I to deny knowledge of the event she referred to? There seemed every reason why I should do so. Those who had committed the attack upon her knew I was not cognisant of the reason, it could not make her suspicious of my identity.

"I swear to you," I said, "that I am absolutely

unconnected with the atrocious assault. Tell me what has occurred?"

"If you are not the direct cause, you are at least the indirect," she said.

"Explain," I demanded.

With terror shining in eyes that glanced apprehensively in every direction, she told me the following tale:—

"As the light was blown out I was grasped by a man possessed of very great strength. A hand was placed over my mouth and I was carried rapidly across the room to some secret entrance, then down a flight of steps, when I was blindfolded. Then I was led across some cellars paved with stones, up another flight of stone steps, until the open air was reached and told that if I uttered a sound I would be stabbed to the heart. I was forced into a coach and driven rapidly away.

"I could not form the slightest idea of the direction in which we were proceeding and cannot even say what interval of time was occupied by the drive: it seemed to be a very long one, but my senses were so distracted as to render any impressions received valueless."

"At the moment of arrival at our destination however, a clock struck. I do not think I should have given the matter a moment's thought had not some person said in a hoarse whisper, 'Quick! quick! her ears! she will know the tones.' I recognised the notes I had heard as those of St. Peter.

"Then you were close to the palace," I observed.

"It must have been so," said Pauline.

"Proceed," I said, "I am devoured by curiosity."

The actress regarded me with a look of aversion.

"Something was clapped over both my ears," she continued, "and held tightly by hands which guided me towards an entrance apparently in some house. I was then led trembling up and down many more stone steps until a dungeon was reached."

I wondered if this was the identical cell in which I had been incarcerated and from which I had emerged by a similar path.

"The door was closed with a loud bang and the bandage torn from my eyes. I found myself confronted by three masked women, whose outlines were very indistinct; for the lantern which lit the place had been put in a remote corner of the dungeon.

"'If our instructions are obeyed," said one of the awful creatures, 'you will have nothing to fear, if not, you will certainly die. We wish to know the results of your investigations concerning the lost treasure. Prevarication will not save you, for we can easily judge whether you are speaking the truth. We know everything but the main point; all that leads up to it in fact.'

"'You are speaking in riddles,' I answered. 'I am absolutely ignorant of any treasure.'

"'Listen, fool,' said the woman, 'this is no time for play acting. Tell us the secret instantly or we will introduce an interrogator whose methods will be more unpleasant than ours.'

"'I swear that your question has astonished me.

I am quite ignorant of what you refer to,' I replied, trembling with terror.

"'Do you deny that for several years past, you have at a certain hour on a fixed day submitted yourself to the interrogation of Colonel von Heiner?'

"'I do not,' I answered.

"'Then why refuse the information we demand?'

"'Because I know nothing of what has taken place at these meetings beyond the fact that I was present.'

"'You are lying,' she said, then turning to her companions, 'Summon him!'

"One of the women opened the door and made some observation.

"A masked man entered bearing a brazier, filled with burning charcoal in which there rested an iron.

"'Now, Pauline,' said the spokeswoman, 'you are an actress and your beauty is of some value to you. Unless my question is answered immediately this fellow shall brand both your cheeks. What will become of your admirers, think you, after that has occurred?'

"I shuddered violently. My mouth and throat became as dry as dust. No words would come. This, Colonel von Heiner, was the situation your accursed machinations placed me in. I wondered that these schemes did not defeat their own ends, for I cannot think why my heart did not stop beating for ever.

"'Ah, she is obstinate,' shouted the she-devil.

'Carry out your instructions,' she added, turning to the torturer.

"He took his red hot iron from the glowing brazier, and slowly advanced towards me. I made a dash in the direction of the door but the women seized and dragged me back. I screamed, but the very sounds were deadened by the stone walls of that evil place: my hands were held and I was pressed backwards. I sank into a sitting posture . . . the glowing iron was advancing slowly . . . I smelt in imagination the burning of my flesh . . saw the horrid scars which would be my companions to my dying day; the fierce breath of the hideous thing fanned my cheeks.

"'Speak fool! speak! it is not too late,' floated through the mist of terror.

"I remember nothing more. I suppose I fainted. When I came too, it was to find myself again the wondering occupant of a coach. Memory returned and with it the horrible thought that I was disfigured for life. But there was no pain. I raised my hand tremblingly; my cheeks were sound. Then I wept tears of joy; such happiness I have never before felt. Ah, Colonel, what have you been doing? Why do you allow such things to occur to me?

"And how do you account for your reappearance here?" I asked.

"The carriage drove to the back of this house, the secret door was opened for me and I came to this room expecting to find you all had arrived. Where are the others?"

As I reflected upon this strange tale the bell of the outer door rang.

The archduke had then arrived.

CHAPTER XIX

A GAME OF CHESS UNVEILS THE PAST

"They have come!" said Pauline.

"Yes," I answered. "I will admit them."

"There is the old man, why trouble?" she replied.

"He has disappeared," I said descending, and not stopping to reply to her ejaculation of surprise.

I opened the door. Two people stood upon the threshold. One, the man who had seized me upon the Dannerg road, the other Madame du Soissons, masked. There was no sign of the archduke.

"All is well so far," said madame, removing her mask as I closed the door. "She has arrived of course?"

I did not answer but led the way upstairs. Whom did Pauline expect? these people or the archduke? What would madame say when she found the actress alive?

The latter rose as they entered, an unhappy look of anticipation upon her features, but no surprise. Evidently all was correct.

"Ha! Henry," she murmured.

"This is Pauline," said the man.

"I have had the pleasure of witnessing your superb acting," said Madame du Soissons, who had remained completely unmoved.

The girl started at the sound of the voice and

threw a questioning glance at the newcomer, then bowed.

There was a silence broken at last by the man Henry.

"Shall we seat ourselves?" he said, "the hour is approaching, and I wish that madame should first receive the details of my strange story. As this is the last opportunity and if we fail to-night the chance will pass away for ever, there is no reason why Pauline should not be acquainted with the cause of the need for her services. Madame, will you take the chair upon the colonel's left."

The actress breathed a sigh of relief as she took her place on my right.

"I am indeed thankful," she murmured, "but trust that the information will not lead to another such experience as I have been through to-night, for I warn you that I am not strong enough to resist torture."

"To what do you refer?" questioned Henry.

Pauline then related her adventures. The man listened with ever increasing wonder and anger to the story; then when she had completed, stifled his emotions saying, "No you need have no fear that you will be molested in the future, all reason for such passes with your final research.

It is quite possible that the reader may wrongly expect the narration to end with the statement that the writer dreamt an evil dream, so extraordinary are the circumstances already recounted and yet to be told. When the explanation however is given at the proper moment, and as revealed to my

unfortunate self, the apparent incongruity of many things will vanish, and the numerous seemingly unconnected events be found to depend upon the great central conspiracy and mystery around which all the others cluster like some poisonous fruit upon the parent stem.

I wondered why the archduke had not appeared. Was he at the spy hole? or was someone else there?

"You must know," said the man Henry, commencing his narration, "that I am a scientist and have for many years been exceedingly interested in the study of psychology; it has the greatest attraction for me generally and specially, in the former case because all mental problems have a fascination for me, and in the latter owing to the fact that I desire to work out a pet theory of my own."

The man did not strike me as belonging to the philosopher class; in fact, had I been asked to guess, that would have been the very last profession I would have hazarded.

"Consciousness, I have always regarded," he continued, "as being composed of feelings and the ideas which invariably cause those feelings; the ideas being produced by the environment, in their turn cause the sensations. The emotions I believe to be the past feelings of our ancestors; each has in the closest contact with it every idea which has ever stirred it, both in the life time of the individual and during that of his forefathers; for I hold that the whole of the sensations and ideas which have been aroused in the brains of the progenitors previous

to the time of the birth of the individual referred to are communicated to him. The only difference between inherited feelings and ideas and those acquired by actual experience is in my opinion that the former are under ordinary conditions agglomerate, and so massed together, that it is impossible to detach any particular memory, whereas the latter are as a rule special and easily disentangled. The reason for this appears to me to be largely, although not entirely, due to the fact that memory so greatly depends upon the principle of the association of ideas, and that most of the external conditions calculated to arouse the records of events which occurred in the time of our forefathers have been swept away by the march of time.

"Frequently however I have been astonished by the sensation that I have seen a particular place or face before. From these ideas there sprang that of the possibility of being able to bring back the history of the past. It seemed to me that if it were feasible to confront a person with something which had made a great impression upon the brain of an ancestor, the events connected with this, would if the individual concentrated his mind upon this object and no other, gradually begin to detach themselves from the general mass. Have I made myself quite clear?" questioned Henry.

All replied in the affirmative, the face of Madame du Soissons was aflame with excitement.

"For years I was unable to test my theory, but when the opportunity came I found to my delight

that I myself possessed the necessary data. Places naturally only excited general memories and the features must have to some extent altered. In the case of a face it could not be exactly the same as an ancestor of mine had seen it because it had either changed or the experiences of descendants must have transformed it. What was required was something which had not varied in any perceptible degree. Whilst walking one day in the neighbourhood of the merchants' quarters, I came upon an old curiosity shop. Amongst the many things exhibited for sale was a wooden chess board with men in position for a game. The edge of this had quaint mediæval figures carved upon it whilst the costumes of the pieces represented those of the fighting men, nobility and royalty of the period, with the exception of the black queen which appeared to be copied from that of an Indian Princess."

Again the prophecy of the aged gipsy recurred to me.

"My eyes," continued Henry, "had no sooner taken in the details than there swept over me a sensation of horror, accompanied by the certain belief that I had seen these articles before. The opportunity I had sought so long was thus at hand. I entered the shop and after much haggling purchased men and board for a comparatively speaking large sum, the dealer being an astute individual and realising at once that my desire to obtain them was great.

"I impatiently waited for night to arrive in order

that I might concentrate my mind upon the object when all was perfectly quiet and there was absolutely no chance of interruption. Then locking myself in my library I arranged the pieces and calmly contemplated the board. The sense of horror increased, but beyond that I obtained no satisfactory results. Occasionally it is true the adumbration of some great tragedy appeared as though about to shape itself, but the least attempt at exercise of will power made it fade away into nothingness. For weeks I made these attempts every night.

"At last however a remarkable thing happened. I had been sitting gazing upon the board for at least an hour, when as my clock struck one in the morning, my room seemed to have changed to an apartment in a nunnery; figures were around me, those of two women and a man; the latter dressed in the costume of an abbot faced me, sitting upon the opposite side of the chess board; two beautiful nuns also sat watching it, their eyes fixed upon it, with looks of misery and terror in them: the horror that was formerly upon me had given place to exultation. I myself was dressed in the costume of a French Count of the days of Henry IV. of France. The most peculiar fact concerning these apparitions was that I seemed to know the faces well and also realised that they resembled people I had met during the few years preceding my vision. I tried to urge my memory, when to my disgust all the figures faded and I was once more sitting in my own room.

"No further attempts at producing the strange

and mysterious scene had the slightest effect; it seemed as though it would be necessary for me to wait until the corresponding day in the following year; why I could not explain. I endeavoured strenuously to think who the three people I had seen in the vision had resembled so much.

"One day whilst in Vienna, I visited the theatre, Pauline was taking the part of the leading actress; to my astonishment when she arrived upon the stage I recognised that she was one of the women in the vision or rather the person so very much like her I had seen once before in Paris. As the knowledge of this forced itself upon me, curiously enough, I became aware that Colonel von Heiner and Madame du Soissons were the second and third concerned and this notwithstanding the fact that I had never seen these three people together. A cry of joy broke from me so loud as to attract the attention of other members of the audience, who demanded silence.

"The line of action appeared to me to be to communicate with the Colonel, who had at one time been a great friend of mine and whom I knew to be a man of considerable resource. Pauline was not easily accessible and you, Madame du Soissons, were less so," said Henry, turning to that lady.

"I visited the colonel who was then in Vienna and laid my theories before him. To my surprise he did not seem at all incredulous, but on the contrary showed a remarkable interest in my story. This was however explained when he informed me that he possessed an heirloom, which had been

handed to him by his father with the instructions that he was on no account to part with it as it was a family talisman against evil. He produced to my delight and surprise, a black queen dressed in mediæval costume and corresponding in every detail with the white one in my possession.

We discussed the affair at great length upon many subsequent occasions, coming however to no conclusion and noting the fact that the chess men represented costumes worn by people many years previous to the period at which the game my memory brought back had been played. Whether they had been made at the time they represented was another matter. The colonel attempted to wrest the secret of the past from the chess board himself with even less success than I had. One evening he rose from his chair however with an exclamation of delight.

"'Are you aware?' he said, 'that Pauline possesses powers of divination? Is it not possible that I can compel her to do with ease, what is to us a giant's task?"

'"You,' I replied, 'how can you compel her?'

"He explained to me that he had great authority over such persons as were capable of the second sight, and we arranged that he should obtain an introduction to her. This was accomplished, and the colonel received Pauline's willing or unwilling co-operation.

"We have been so far successful as to gather that a great treasure had apparently come into the possession of the two men, or rather that they knew

of the existence of such, and decided to contest the right to it by a game of chess, the nuns were the sisters of the combatants, the one like Pauline being related to the man similar to myself, the other to the colonel. Although not present at the drama, there seems to have been another woman connected with it; so far however we have been unable to ascertain her exact appearance or relation to any of the others.

"Our method upon each occasion has been to seat ourselves upon opposite sides of the chess board, Pauline being in the position in which she sat at the time of the original drama. Gradually the game as played by our ancestors has developed in the brain of the actress, and as it has done so many of the circumstances connected with it have arisen therein. Upon the last occasion however a deadlock was reached; at a certain point of the game further recollection in any form ceased to issue, notwithstanding all our efforts. As I explained to you, Madame, any knowledge will be useless after tonight and we are resolved to take you into our confidence, hoping that your presence in the place occupied by your ancestor would supply the necessary association and enable us to wrest this great secret from the past. You perhaps ask why we pursue this quest. In addition to the desire to satisfy our curiosity there is the fact that amongst the vague recollections of Pauline are some to the effect that neither of these men obtained the treasure, that they were both killed, probably by counterplots, and behind it all she has a haunting

sensation that the place where it was located was never revealed."

I noticed at this point that the pendant was missing from the neck of Pauline.

"Upon each occasion," continued Henry, "it has been necessary to let Pauline relate the scene that once occurred in the dim past in order to refresh her memory; at her instructions also the colonel and I make the moves. So far no further recollection has manifested itself to him or myself; should it be different with yourself, we beg that you will at once communicate the fact which comes back to you, and we particularly ask you to concentrate your mind upon the proceedings at the fourteenth move, for it is beyond that we are at fault."

Pauline had gradually become more and more restless and it was easy to see that the sufferings this strange investigation had caused must have been very great. Could it then be true? Was it possible to probe thus the secrets of the past? If so the whole history of mankind might be revealed. The idea possessed a fascination indeed. But how did the explanation of this affect the archduke? What connection had I with the affair? Were Von Heiner and myself cousins very far removed? Did heredity account for the great similarity of voice? Had he by some means combined the circumstances and used them as a lever to oust the archduke from his throne? What part was Marguerite taking? Who was the still unremembered woman like? Then there was the archduchess, the strange crimson coloured canvases, the summons to Oranz, the

attack upon my life at Von Graubler's place and the numbers of other mysterious points the history of my terrible experiences had so far revealed.

"Are you all ready then?" asked Henry, breaking in upon my reflections, "let me once more impress upon you, Madame du Soissons, the necessity for keeping your mind a perfect blank and concentrating your thoughts upon the game; let none of the events of this life enter into your brain; should anything concerning a past existence arise, frame it at once in words and again focus upon the chess."

"Are you quite prepared, Pauline?" he demanded.

"Then obey me," he replied to her affirmative. "Go back to the past as of yore."

This was curious; he had distinctly said that Von Heiner had held the sway over Pauline; now he was directing the investigation. I judged however that had I really been Von Heiner the explanation would have been obvious.

"What do you see?" he questioned.

For a moment the actress was silent, then in strident tones she commenced.

"I am in the convent of St. Mary's watching from the windows over the plains. We are expecting someone, Beatrice and myself. How my heart beats! will they never come. She is watching me, how can I conceal my agitation, her prying eyes are ever upon me. So much depends upon the result of this strange duel. Will they never come? Ha! a sister enters. We are summoned, have they arrived? I heard no sound of horses."

The face of Pauline was no longer beautiful; the

great mental struggle caused her brow to lower and contract; the muscles became tense; a light perspiration also became apparent. With one bound she had leaped across the gulf that divides us from the past, back over the myriad recollections of several separate existences and associated herself with those far-away memories; just as an ordinary person might have had the relations of some far-away scene of childhood brough back by the scent of a flower, as vividly as though the eyes had gazed upon them yesterday.

But the voice of Pauline continued. "We enter the abbess' room," she said; "why is she absent? The Abbot of St. John's, my brother, and the Count de la Horte await us. The chess board is in the centre of the room. Without a word of welcome, so greatly interested are all in what is about to occur, we move towards it. The men seat themselves at once. How my heart beats. Why can I not still it?"

My eyes fell upon Madame du Soissons, her glance was riveted to the chess board: that of the man opposite was set in inflexible determination upon the actress. If the thing could be probed, he was the man to do it even at the expense of the life of the poor girl. I felt this and shuddered.

"Ah, my brother has lost the odds!" she cried.

I noted that the white men were upon my side.

"He moves; white pawn to king's fourth," said the actress.

I did as directed.

"Pawn to king's fourth for black."

Henry in his turn moved.

"Pawn to king's bishops fourth for white.

"Pawn takes pawn for black.

"Knight to king's bishops third for white.

"Pawn to king's knights fourth for black.

"Bishop to queen's bishops fourth for white

"Pawn to king's knights fifth for black."

"As the girl at short intervals shouted out the moves so we made them. By this time the black pawn had advanced to a position in which it could take the knight without white being able to avail himself of a corresponding gain of a piece. I fully expected the knight to be moved, but to my surprise the instructions from Pauline were to castle. Then there came to me a recollection of a certain conversation I had overheard between two celebrated chess players of the day, who were discussing the merits of a gambit, in which a piece was sacrificed at the opening stages of the game for the sake of a gain in position and a winning attack. The originator was I believe stated by Salvio to be Dom Geromimo Cascio. Doubtless this was the game referred to. I watched with, if possible, greater interest than before, as I was a keen chess player.

It was not long before the fine nature of the attack, which the sacrifice had purchased, began to be obvious. Black's chief object had been to develop his game by means of exchanging pieces, for the oftener he was able to accomplish this, the weaker became white's attack, the fury of which was so great that my opponent's right wing was unable to come into action at all.

I again glanced at the unhappy Pauline. With clenched hands and staring eyeballs, she followed every movement of ours with impatience and avidity. Madame du Soissons pressed her hands over her eyes for an instant; she seemed lost to her surroundings now, had she also come under the spell of the past? Henry's eyes were upon the actress, the same stern look in them.

Gradually white began to feel the loss of his piece; like the stronger of two wrestlers, black seemed to slowly rise from a fall in spite of vigorous downward pressure from his opponent. If the game were not won before that right wing came into action I could see all was lost. The fifteenth move arrived and with it, as far as I could judge, the crisis of the game. This was the one which Pauline in her normal state, or such as I believed to be it, had bidden me beware of and study well. But I had understood that I was to make the move, for she had enjoined care.

I caught Henry's eye, which was questioning me; he frowned and nodded towards the board. I understood. It had been previously agreed upon by Von Heiner and himself that the former was to make this move without reference to Pauline for some reason. I proceeded to study the game from the point of view of an actual player. I saw no immediate danger threatening white or black; the position was as I have represented above.

Suddenly I observed that, five moves ahead, I could capture the black queen by making a certain move. There seemed nothing to prevent it. Then

I recollected the warning and again studied the game. Yes! there was a flaw, which merely appeared at first to be a means of ievasion for black, then developed into a remarkable form of mate, seven times could the white king be checked and driven from point to point until it reached a square upon which it could be mated; there was absolutely no means of preventing it.

Then arose the question as to what I should do. Was it better to take the advice of Pauline or run counter to it. I decided to do the former and made no attempt to capture the black queen. As I moved a groan broke from the lips of the actress.

"Now is your opportunity, Pauline," said Henry, "if he has done correctly the day is ours. I command you to bring every resource of your nature to bear upon this divination. Do you hear me?"

The wretched girl, who was now writhing in agony, nodded assent.

"See! see! it is there," she muttered, "but a body, a blood-stained body lies over it. Ah! I remember now! Yes, I remember," then she shivered as though possessed of an ague.

The expression upon her face changed with lightning rapidity. A look of gentle triumph suffused it.

Henry exchanged glances of wonder with me. The Du Soissons sat with bowed head.

"The game is mine, Zuleika," Pauline said, "I mate in seven moves . . . . Ah, that noise! those shouts. What is this! my husband returns you

say? The great conqueror has come once more to his own. Open wide the gates! O, my women, come to welcome your great and victorious Lord! Faster! Faster! why so slow! Let him not enter to find the reception accorded to the meanest of warriors. Think of his mighty exploits, of the embalmed heads of the three great kings which repose in our treasury and let our voices ring forth the pride we feel in our triumphant monarch who has humbled the proud invader of India."

What was this?

"The queen! the odd queen!" whispered Henry, its associations are arising within her brain, perchance she is also the descendant of the woman she sees and is acting the part she played in some great event of very ancient days.

"Why these bent heads, my women? What, tears? By the great gods is this your welcome to a conqueror? As I live and as my glorious husband lives your heads shall bite the dust for this. You groan. O Zuleika! best and dearest of all my women, tell me what this means? In tears also? thou! Some calamity has befallen the army then. No! it is impossible, if the foe was crushed as my Lord informed us, who could strike such a blow? But some great misfortune has occurred, my heart feels it. No! no! it is you, accursed vile birds of ill omen that you are. I choke! I choke!

"He comes! He comes! My Lord comes!
In a moment these arms shall enfold him
To the entrance, girls, and bring him to
me garlanded with flowers as becomes the

monarch of the earth. Quick! do you not hear the trumpets? Listen to the sound of many footsteps!

The eyes of the actress were strained as though she watched some entrance in agony of anticipation: her hand was upon her heart. Suddenly she shrieked aloud, flung both hands to her brow and gazed beneath them with a terrified glare.

"You carry him, slaves! He is dead! O my Lord! My dear Lord!"

There was a silence.

"Wounded! wounded! you say in the battle," she muttered like a mad creature, "and he has died upon the homeward journey. He would not have me told."

I looked upon the poor girl in pitying silence, the experiences that had moulded her had indeed been awful.

"We have had enough of this," hissed Henry. "Although interesting it is perfectly profitless as far as the treasure is concerned; the memory of the murdered man across the treasure has doubtless brought back the more ancient recollections concerning her ancestress' experience in India."

"Speak! speak! I command you," he roared springing to his feet.

Pauline was now perfectly quiet, not a sound issued from her lips: her mad glare affrighted me.

Madame du Soissons sat as though carved in stone, in the same attitude.

"Speak, woman! I say speak! I demand from you the nature and position of the secret treasure

for which our ancestors played this game of chess."

A laugh and an awful cry broke from the lips of Pauline.

"I will not!" she shrieked, "I defy you! We have been damned unto the fourth generation, the curse shall not be perpetuated. My slumbering will has awakened, it is stronger than yours."

"Ha! I thought so," shouted Henry, "then Von Heiner himself shall deal with you."

"He cannot," said the woman with a ring of exultation in her voice.

"We shall see. Colonel, resume the management of this affair; gentler measures are useless. I was wrong to interfere. Order her to speak, quickly though; the strain is great and I fear she may succumb. I am something of a doctor."

I could not speak, words refused to come. Great as my desire to probe the mystery was, how could I further torture this poor girl.

"Why hesitate?" shouted Henry. "Deal with the accursed hussy."

"He cannot, I say. The colonel will never harm me again; his last vile action has been accomplished. He sits within a dungeon. I see the irons upon his arms and legs. To-morrow he shall have goodly company. Did you think, Henry, that your evil practices would flourish for ever? there is a dark ring around your own neck."

"You lie!" Henry stared at me.

Madame du Soissons was no longer inanimate, the words of Pauline had brought her back to the

present; her eyes were also fixed upon me in questioning wonder.

"I do not lie. The man who sits in front of you is not Colonel von Heiner but my husband Count Adrian of Arndt."

For the second time this girl had claimed me for her husband.

The man's jaws dropped, he half rose and resting both hands upon the table peered, with the evil scowl upon his countenance gradually increasing, into mine. Madame scrutinised me, carefully with fear in her glance, then leaning sideways, examined my profile.

Henry stepped to her side. "It is true!" he howled. "We have been betrayed. But it is not too late, thanks to Pauline."

As he spoke he drew a pistol and presented it full at my face. At the same instant however Madame du Soissons sprang up, seized his arm and bore it upwards.

"You fool," issued from her; "how would that serve your purpose? Is this the only interest at stake?"

CHAPTER XX

THE ARREST

"You are right," answered the man. "Go, Count," he said sullenly.

At that moment Pauline fell upon the floor in a faint.

"Not before the poor girl has been revived," I replied.

"Go!" said the woman, "I will attend to her. You have my word for that."

"Your word, Madame," I answered ironically.

"Remain if you will," she whispered, coming close to me, "but remember that every minute's delay is one of torture to the woman you love and that this girl is no friend of yours."

It might be so. How could I say? Perhaps it was better for me to do as requested. I had decided for the sake of Marguerite to interfere with nothing and it was better to carry out this scheme in its entirety.

The man Henry still regarded me furiously and it seemed that at any moment his anger might overcome his desire to do what was most beneficial for his plot. Why had he not insisted upon an explanation as to my presence there in lieu of his friend's ?

With a parting glance at Pauline, who was being

attended to by Madame du Soissons and exhibited signs of returning life, I left the room and descended the stairs, passing once more out into the night.

At the appointed spot stood the carriage. I approached the house of Von Graubler, wondering whether he also would be deceived by my likeness to the Colonel. I was admitted and shewn into a special reception room of the General's. I gave no name, leaving it to the lackey to announce me as he chose.

"Ah, Count," remarked Von Graubler, as his eyes fell upon me, "and so you have thought fit to return and apologise for your behaviour." His shifty eyes scanned me from head to foot. "You have chosen a strange hour," he continued.

"Yes," I replied, "I was very hasty." It seemed best to evade reference to time.

"You are a little late, allow me to inform you. I have already decided to regard you as an enemy."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I wish to take a mean advantage of no one however. You have many such and I am now one of them."

My eye fell upon something lying on the table. The general followed the direction of my glance and rising hastily replaced the article in the covering from which it had been taken. It was the blood red canvas.

"That is a very curious painting, General," I ventured.

"Hardly such, Count. By the way, you attend the ball to-morrow or rather to-day of course?"

"You will pardon my returning again to the painting, General," I said, "but I am very much interested in it, having seen a similar one under rather curious circumstances."

"Ah, indeed," he responded, "as a matter of fact I know nothing about it. It arrived about half an hour before you came. I am even unacquainted with the sender."

"And yet," I said, curious to see the effect upon him of my words, "you seemed anxious to prevent my looking at it just now."

"I have a right to do as I choose with my own property or rather such articles as are committed to my care, I presume?" he questioned angrily.

"Beware, General," I said at random, "that your obligations to your friends do not prove too much for you."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, turning colour.

"Perhaps you know as well as I do."

He rose and paced the room, then when at my end he suddenly turned and confronted me.

"Where is Marguerite?" he asked. "Tell me, and I will consider the situation afresh."

"I think perhaps you are in a better position than I am to answer this question," I replied. "Let us finish with this duplicity."

He looked again into my face, shook his head and bowed.

"I wish you good-night, Count," he said.

I left the house and entered the carriage. The coachman lashed his horse and we sped forward at

once. What further thing was to befall me? Dazed, I lay back against the cushions determined to let fate do with me as it would, for I was weary of existence.

I had been seated a very short time when the vehicle stopped. I put my head out of the window. We had arrived at my own house. I descended; there was a bright light in the front room of the first floor. How was I to account for this? Who could my visitor possibly be at this hour of the night?

I felt a fearful shock beneath the heart and fell half unconscious to the ground.

"Thus, Colonel, is my daughter avenged!" The voice was that of the old coachman. His whip fell upon the heads of his horses and with loud snortings they galloped off.

For some seconds I lay too stupefied to move. I felt my left side, beyond a slight gash in the coat no damage had been done. The man had aimed a terrific blow at my heart and missed it; but the hilt of the dagger in his hand had struck me with sufficient force to cause temporary prostration. I quickly recovered.

The archduke was wrong then, my life had been attempted. But consideration showed me that possibly this was an affair quite outside the counter-plots in progress. Perhaps this old man had some private vengeance to wreak and had taken the opportunity circumstances afforded him to do so: was it his daughter who had been strangled?

Pursuit was hopeless and I was weary and

anxious to know who my visitors were. I knocked loudly upon the door.

It was answered by a lackey in whose eyes there gleamed a look of warning.

"Fly, sir! fly!" he whispered.

I paid no attention however, and entered. The door was closed.

"Some gentlemen await you, sir, upon the first floor," the man said.

At that moment two soldiers hastily came from the lower front room, which was in darkness, and took up a position in front of the entrance door. One blew a whistle. There were footsteps overhead. A voice I recognised spoke and the magistrate of my district appeared above. He descended the stairs and faced me.

"I am here," he said, "to hold an investigation into several serious crimes that have been perpetrated in our neighbourhood lately, Count Adrian of Arndt, and request that you will be good enough to ascend to the upper room, where my witnesses are assembled."

"I should have thought," I said haughtily, "in the first place that this affair could have stood over until a more reasonable hour; in the second that some reference might have been made to me before unwarrantably assuming control over my house."

A horrible feeling of dread began to steal over me though. Was it possible that I was about to be arrested at this critical time for murder, just when my liberty was absolutely essential?

"I regret," replied the magistrate regarding me

with a glance as supercilious as my own, "that certain information I have received compelled me to take these steps; if however enquiry and discussion prove that I have erred, I shall be the first to humbly apologise. Will you be good enough to follow me?"

I complied. The soldiers walked at my heels.

"These fellows can remain below," I said.

"I have ordered them to follow," was the answer.

"Am I then to consider myself a prisoner?" I demanded hotly.

"I fear so for the present."

"You shall answer for this behaviour," I protested.

"All my duties are carried out, Count, with such a possibility in view," replied the judge. "I do my utmost: the best may err."

This man and his ancestors had been no friend to me and mine; there was however no definite quarrel, although possibly there had been a family feud in the past which accounted for the present state of affairs. He was however, thoroughly, honourable and I did not doubt, doing what he considered to be his duty. That he had sufficient ground for my arrest will now appear.

As I entered the room my eyes fell upon the innkeeper of Orlau. By his side there stood a peasant, unknown to me, an honest enough looking fellow. Three other soldiers stood on guard.

"Count Adrian of Ardnt," said my captor, "in my capacity as magistrate of the Herlanz district, I

arrest you in the name of His Royal Highness the Hereditary Archduke of Bremlauz, upon suspicion of having murdered Count von Waldeau on Sunday night last and some person unknown in the deserted chateau of Dannerg on Monday."

"I am not guilty of these crimes," I answered.

"Stand forward, Herman," said the magistrate.

The innkeeper advanced and faced me.

"Upon Sunday night last," he said, "I was awakened by several people who asked me various questions. After they had gone and just as I was about to dose off a horse galloped past my window at a mad pace. I sprang out of bed but was too late to catch even a glimpse of it or the rider, whom I judged to be the devil himself for, as I told the Count Adrian, no human—"

"Enough of that," broke in the magistrate. "Keep to the main facts."

"I got into bed again," the fellow continued, "and tried once more to sleep. This time I was roused by a violent hammering at my door and jumped out to find this gentleman there."

"You are sure it was the Count of Arndt?" questioned the judge.

"I can swear to him, I have known him from boyhood."

"Do you deny this, Count?" queried the magistrate.

"It is perfectly true," I answered.

"That will suffice. Stand back. Step forward, Brumaur, and speak."

The countryman stepped awkwardly to the front.

"Upon last Sunday night," he began, "as it was moonlight I decided to start upon a walk from Vaschauz to Nirbounne in order to collect some money owing to me there. Just beyond Orlau, close to a small bridge, I rested in the deep shadow of a large tree. I had not been seated there long before this gentleman and an old man rode up. He told the latter that if they concealed themselves in that place there was no fear of missing somebody, I did not catch the name.

Then they searched upon the opposite side of the road for a good hiding-place. Seeing that they were both well armed I crept along in the shadows as much as possible until I was out of sight and hearing and then ran away as fast as I was able."

"And why did you not wait and attempt to warn the person whose life was threatened?" demanded the magistrate.

"What could I, a poor peasant do?" cried the man. "I did not even know the direction in which he was coming. I might even have been charged with the crime had I remained."

"And what have you to say to this?" asked the representative of the law.

I proceeded to relate what had actually occurred as regards the shooting of Von Waldeau, judging that this would be the best means of retaining my liberty, for I felt that this affair must be taking place outside the knowledge of the archduke, as the evidence of the peasant was a case of pure chance, and knew not what the result of my incarceration even for a short time might lead to.

"And what were you doing upon the Orlau road at that time of the night?" came the question.

Decidedly I was now cornered, as I dare not give any particulars and risk this man's interference.

"Are you aware that your fiancée, the Countess Linzorf, has been abducted?"

"I am," I answered.

"Had your movements any connection with this disappearance?"

"They had, but I can give you no further information upon the subject now."

"Very well, Count. Now Brumaur, proceed with your evidence."

"Upon the next afternoon, I was passing the road that leads to Dannerg, when hearing footsteps I hid myself behind the trees. This gentleman again appeared, looking very ill. Upon my return journey I heard that the Count von Waldeau had been murdered near Orlau in the road and I gave my evidence."

"Are you aware," questioned the magistrate, "that a dead body has been discovered in the chateau of Dannerg, that a man has been poisoned to death there?"

"I have only been told so," the man replied.

"Did you know that this man had been killed, Count Adrian?" questioned the judge.

"I was aware of the fact," I answered.

"How did you know that?"

"Because I had occasion to visit the chateau of Dannerg and found him there."

"Was this visit in connection with the abduction of your fiancée also?"

"It was."

"And have you given any information concerning the death of the poor man to the authorities and if not why?"

I commenced to perspire. In my excitement the case against myself had not presented itself in this aspect.

"You hesitate, Count. I must demand a speedy reply to my question."

"I request that you will allow me to reserve my defence," I replied. "You must see that my position is a difficult one."

"I certainly note indeed that your predicament is an unfortunate one," was the grave response. "You recognise of course, that, under the circumstances your liberty must be temporarily sacrificed."

"Surely if I give my parole it will suffice?"

"Not in this case, I regret. It is one of murder. And now it is my painful duty to inform you that it will be necessary for me to search these premises. I have been told by the police who have been watching your house that a strange burden entered it some little time ago and your men have not denied the charge."

"A strange burden," I stammered. "Summon my lackeys, please."

The men filed into the room, five in all, the two I had brought with me and the three that always remained in charge of the premises.

"I am informed," I said, "that some strange

thing has arrived in my absence. Speak out, men, there is nothing to conceal."

They cast furtive glances at each other.

"Speak!" I shouted, "what does this behaviour mean? When did it arrive?"

"About an hour ago," said one.

"Where is it?"

"We put it where you ordered, sir."

"Where I ordered it," I roared. "What do you mean, scoundrel?"

"Sir," said the fellow, "did you not come to the door at the back of the house?"

"I did not," I said furiously.

"Enough," cried the magistrate, "lead the way to the place where this thing is concealed."

This arrest then, was, after all, a fresh plot to keep me out of action, and away from the complications. If my double had been at the house he must be free once more and able to recommence his machinations. It was hardly likely that a tale of a double would be believed at such a juncture. If it were it would be equally damaging to my cause, for it would probably lead to the magistrate interfering with the plans of His Highness. Doubtless the best course was to let events lead where they chose, more particularly as I felt now that the arrest was no chance, however much the magistrate himself believed me to be guilty. It certainly seemed that for the furtherance of the plans of the archduke, Von Heiner had to be kept a prisoner, whilst I was left at liberty to impersonate him. The colonel on his part was anxious to have me

incarcerated in order that he might at times assume the rôle of Count of Arndt. But why should he wish to do so, that was the question, and how could the wholesale murders that had taken place be accounted for? I could not conceive that Von Waldeau and the unknown had been killed at an early stage of the proceedings merely to afford a means of having me arrested now; such a necessity had only recently presented itself.

I found the party staring at me.

"Lead us to this thing," I cried, incensed at my own stupid behaviour at such a crisis.

The lackey who had spoken went first, the magistrate followed puffing and panting, for he was a corpulent man. We halted for a moment outside my bedroom door and the light from the solitary candle fell upon a strange group, the breathless important judge, the white-faced lackeys, and the bronzed soldiers emotionless and grim.

"Open!" said the magistrate.

My man obeyed and we entered.

My eyes roamed round the room, then fell upon a couch; some covered shapeless thing reposed on it. I had seen something like it quite recently at the chateau of Dannerg.

All eyes were upon me. I trembled violently.

"Remove that cover," blurted from my lips.

"No! No! it is fitter that you should do so yourself," said the magistrate.

They did not understand my feelings and attributed them to something else. I feared truly,

but the cause was a different one from that they imagined it to be. Who was beneath that covering? Was it Marguerite? I strode towards it. A feeling of nausea arose.

"Bring the light closer." My voice was scarcely recognisable.

The man obeyed and all moved with him.

I flung back the cloth.

The face of the wretched woman who had been strangled at the house of Pauline was revealed.

I turned and faced the men; they must have observed the look of relief upon my countenance, for they seemed puzzled.

"What have you to say concerning this terrible business?" questioned the magistrate.

Here was another dilemma. Was I to deny all knowledge whatsoever of the affair? It was different slightly from the other cases, for there were no witnesses to contend with; apparently by admitting knowledge I should expose more than necessary.

"I reserve my defence and refuse to answer any questions in connection with these awful murders," I replied. "My life is at stake and the best advice is necessary."

"What were the instructions given by the count when this body was delivered by him at the back of the house?" demanded the magistrate.

"He told me to place it in his room upon the couch without delay and await his arrival at the front door; upon no account was I to delay when he knocked."

"Did he say nothing else? Did he not for instance state no one must be told?"

"Yes, he offered us all two years' wages apiece if we held our tongues until he was safe out of the country and told us his life was at stake. He then ran away quickly."

"Were you all at the door then?"

"No, only myself. I heard the knocking. He knew that the others must know of the business though."

The fellow bent over the body and drew back with a start.

"It is gone," he muttered almost to himself.

"What is gone?" demanded the magistrate.

"The diamond pendant."

"Was there such an ornament then," questioned the judge, "when you left the woman?"

The man looked as though he wished he had not spoken.

"Yes," he replied, "I swear it was there when I covered up the body."

"You looked at the face then?"

"Yes," answered the lackey sheepishly.

If this man was guilty of theft he would not have mentioned the subject I thought; moreover I bore in mind the curious nature of past events. I had seen the fellow produce the key and unlock the door. Who had entered the room then? and how had he accomplished the feat. What was the secret of the pendant?

Something lay at the side of the body, between it and the edge of the couch, I bent forward and

picked it up. It was a small canvas covered with blood red paint. I flung it back with a shiver.

The magistrate in his turn examined it.

"What a strange thing to find upon the body," he remarked, looking at me narrowly. "How do you account for it?"

"I make no attempt at doing so," I responded truthfully.

I wondered who the poor girl was, and if she had any connection with the strange game of chess I had witnessed. Was she the descendant of the unknown woman who had been so vaguely referred to? The reason for her death was beyond my conjecture.

"You swear," asked the magistrate, "that you know nothing concerning this mysterious affair?"

"I can tell you nothing more than you see," I said.

"It will be necessary for me to put you and your servants all under arrest. You of course, Count Adrian, have no objection to raise as you decline to answer my questions."

I shrugged my shoulders exclaiming, "I protest against your action. Give me at least until to-morrow."

"I repeat I cannot. You will give your parole not to attempt to escape on the way?"

"I decline," I replied.

"Then shoot him, soldiers, like a dog if he does so; have no fear whatsoever."

The body of the murdered woman was brought down from my room, and four more soldiers who had been secreted in some part of the building were

deputed to carry it. All the lights were put out and we left the house. Not a word was spoken beyond a muttered curse occasionally from the bearers of the corpse, as they stumbled owing to the awkwardness of their burden. We walked towards the castle; I was once more to be made a prisoner then in it. The question now arose as to whether it would be advisable for me to communicate with the archduke. Presumably not, for if my arrest were due to the cause I believed, he would probably hear of it long before the hour for the ball, and however much it might be necessary for His Highness to know that I was no longer at liberty, the result of disobedience of his orders might be more disastrous than leaving him in ignorance. There was no possibility of effective flight, for I observed that the soldiers watched me closely, and could see that they were men who would not hesitate to carry out their instructions.

The castle at last appeared.

As we approached the prisoners, entrance, three men, closely muffled, hastily emerged from it. At the sight of us they attemped to conceal their identity more than ever.

Suddenly an exclamation of joy shot from the lips of one of them.

"It is he," said a voice that I recognised as belonging to the archduke.

His Highness approached.

"You, Strudolf!" he cried credulously. "What in the fiend's name are you doing in Bremlauz, and how was this capture brought about?"

"A simple enough matter, Your Royal Highness," replied the Magistrate, "I waited until he returned to his house and then placed soldiers between him and the front door."

"Ah, indeed! and to which house do you refer?"

"His own in the Hartz Road."

"The colonel has no house there to my knowledge."

"The colonel, Your Royal Highness?"

"Yes, the colonel, dolt. Colonel von Heiner."

The magistrate stared from me to the archduke.

One of the latter's men now stepped forward and whispered to His Highness.

"Sire," said the official, "this gentleman is, to the best of my knowledge, Count Adrian of Arndt."

"You fool! you thrice cursed fool!" said the archduke.

The magistrate drew himself up with great dignity.

"Sire," he said, "with great inconvenience to myself, I have arrested this man whom I believe to be an assassin. There are some who would have waited until the morning, and perhaps allowed a criminal to escape."

"This man is no criminal," replied the archduke, in an impatient voice, "and he must be set at liberty at once."

"It is impossible, Sire. You do not comprehend the order you are giving."

The eyes of His Highness flamed with fury, but he controlled himself.

"Release the Count of Arndt," he thundered.

"In the name of my office as guardian of the

public peace, I refuse to release a murderer, Sire; I insist upon this until you have at least heard the evidence against him. He then proceeded to give a brief outline of the charges against me.

"Listen, Strudolf, but first bid these men go out of earshot," said His Highness at the completion.

The soldiers and lackeys retired.

"Remember," continued the archduke, "not to breathe one word of this to a living soul, or you will die. I know however you are to be trusted. Do you remember the name by which I called the count?"

"You called him Colonel von Heiner, Sire."

"Well, a villain resembling him, and known by this name has been masquerading as the count and has committed these crimes. I can prove this, and will do so in due course. In the meantime if we are to thwart the schemes of the scoundrel, Count Adrian must have his liberty this instant. I myself have this moment set out with the object of assisting in the arrest of the colonel."

"Your Royal Highness," replied the magistrate, "I trust you will forgive my zeal and haste; I acted as I thought for the best."

"I can only wish," replied the archduke, "that all my officials were as praiseworthy as yourself. Have the body of that poor woman handed over to the proper authorities. I wish you a very good-night."

The magistrate left giving orders to the soldiers, who departed carrying away the corpse.

"Now," whispered His Highness to me, "the

matter stands as before and the game is even. It was fortunate indeed that we met or I fear the advantage would have rested with the colonel. You must have courage and patience, Count Adrian! All I ask of you to-night is that you return at once to your house as though nothing had happened and obey my instructions already issued to the letter."

So saying he left me and calling to his companions walked away.

I went slowly home, followed by my lackeys and reflecting once more upon the strange situation; a little light had certainly been afforded me, but only sufficient to make the mystery look more inpenetrable than ever.

I mounted to my room, undressed and threw myself upon my bed, but sleep would not come. Excitement and overwork had placed my imagination beyond the control of my will; try as I would ideas and theories would force themselves upon me.

Suddenly I heard a noise in the direction of the window. I looked out, a small oblong article was dangling from a string suspended from above, the edge of it knocking against the glass had caused the sound.

I sprang out of bed, lifted the sash and seized the object.

"Is that the Count of Arndt?" said a voice which resembled that of the coachman.

"It is," I replied.

"Then my duty is accomplished. The notice has been served upon the last man. Take warning, Count, and keep away from the palace ball to-night

or the light you see breaking in the East will herald your last day."

"Who are you?" I questioned.

"My actual identity is of no importance; let it suffice me to explain that we met upon the Herlanz Road and that I found it necessary to attempt your life in the grounds of the chateau of Maros. If you obey my instructions and remain absent from the festivities you will have no cause whatsoever for further complaint. Your intended bride shall be returned to you none the worse for her temporary confinement. If you persist in crossing my path she will end her days in a convent mourning the loss of one she loves."

"What guarantee have I for all this?" I asked.

"None, I fear, save my word."

"You can hardly expect me to accept this."

"I speak for your good, Count, not mine, it is immaterial to me whether you accept my conditions or not."

"May I hear the reasons for the abduction then and judge for myself as to the possibility of your statements. With so much at stake surely I may be granted this, more especially as they must be known to your enemies?"

There was no reply to this or further questioning. Attempt at pursuit would I knew be useless.

I fancied I knew what was in the package. By the light of the moon I tore off the covering and examined the contents.

It was a small canvas covered with blood red paint. I was right.

Decidedly the mystery was beyond me. I flung the thing upon my table and shutting the window threw myself again upon the bed. But sleep would not come, the new problem demanded attention. Why was this thing sent to me? From the man's warning I ought, it seemed to me, to be in possession of certain knowledge. Why did I not possess it and of what did it consist? A riddle such as a piece of canvas daubed with red could scarcely be considered sufficient to warrant the sender assassinating me on the score of disobedience of his commands. Something was missing; there was a link in the chain wanting.

CHAPTER XXI

A STEEL BARRIER IS REMOVED

At last I fell asleep, being called two hours later by my servant. After breakfast I presented myself at the Church of St. Thomas. No one appeared. I passed a restless day, alternately returning to my abode and wandering aimlessly about the Capital, occasionally meeting an acquaintance but none of those whose appearance would have been welcome. Further enquiries at the houses of my friends were fruitless. The ball was to be opened by the archduke at nine o'clock. At eight I was quite ready, despite my resolution to postpone all preparations until the last possible minute, in order to obviate the impatience I knew would ensue as the time for action drew near if there was nothing to occupy my attention: my excitement was so great that the thought of the time which intervened was almost insupportable.

Within a short period of the time I had assigned for my departure there was a loud knock at the door; the Captain of the Guard was announced and strode in.

His face wore a perturbed expression, there were deep lines upon his forehead, and his manner was that of one about to ask something which he was aware beforehand would in all probability be refused.

I saluted him coldly, for he had never been a friend of mine and in addition to the fact that there had been much in his actions connected with the conspiracy calculated to throw suspicion upon him, his behaviour did not modify the unfavourable impressions I had concerning him.

"You will pardon me, Captain," I said, "not offering you a seat, but it is imperative that I attend the opening of the ball this evening and there is not much time to spare."

Von Rootzen regarded me with a curious look as though in doubt as to how he should express himself.

"Have you any unpleasant news to communicate?" I queried.

"The fact is," answered the captain, "I have a strange request to make."

He paused, apparently still finding difficulty in stating his business and struggling with emotions. His glance wandered from his boots to his sword hilt, from thence to the fireplace, eventually seeking my face again.

I made an impatient movement.

"Count Adrian," he said at length, "to come to the point without further delay, and begging your forgiveness for my strange behaviour, I desire to ask you not to attend the ball to-night."

For a moment I was speechless, then a laugh forced itself from my lips.

"You cannot mean this, Von Rootzen?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It cannot be your own wish," I continued, gazing at the handsome dark countenance of the man which mirrored half a dozen emotions.

"It is not my wish," he muttered grimly; "believe me, nothing would, please me better than to facilitate your immediate departure."

"Then who desires it?" I queried.

"It is the wish of a lady acquaintances of yours."

"A mutual acquaintance?"

"Yes."

"And who is this lady?"

"It is her desire that her name should be kept from you if possible," he said.

"And so you expect that I shall deny myself the pleasure of the ball because, forsooth, some lady chooses to affect a singular whim. You will I presume at least assign some reason."

"If you attend this ball, you will not survive the function," he said, casting a malevolent look at me.

"Is this your own view of the case or does it merely represent that of the lady?"

"My own opinon will remain unstated," replied the captain, "the warning is that of the lady at whose request I came here."

"Well I fear that without more valid reasons than those you have chosen to give I shall be compelled to ask you to be good enough to excuse my setting out for the ball."

"And if I tell you the name of the person in whose service I am acting?"

"I will certainly consider the question again," I answered.

"I come then, Count Adrian," he said, in a low voice, "in the name of Her Highness the Archduchess of Bremlauz."

"The Archduchess," I echoed.

"Her Highness," he repeated with an evil scowl.

As he spoke, all the passions which I had observed lying dormant seemed to blaze into life; his glance swept the apartment taking in the positions of windows and door.

What fresh development was this? Was this move upon the part of the archduchess intended for my good or evil? Had she taken sides against her husband? Certainly it appeared to be so, for my definite orders were to attend the ball. Or stay, had the archduchess really sent the message?

I looked at the soldier again. His eyes were fixed upon my face and seemed desirous of reading my inmost thoughts.

"Have you nothing in writing?" I asked.

The captain flushed angrily, and his hand fell lightly upon the hilt of his sword.

"Forgive me," I said, "as from one gentleman to another I apologise, but there are occasions, Captain, when even social courtesies must be dispensed with, the present moment is one of them."

"I have nothing in writing, Count," replied Von Rootzen, "because it would be too dangerous to carry a missive, but the archduchess bade me ask you, if you should require further proof than my word, to recall the words she used in the Inn at

Vaschauz, referring to the possibility of your affection for a certain lady being replaced by that for another."

"I remember the occasion, Captain, and crave your pardon, but did the archduchess repeat the actual words to you?" I asked.

"She did not," he answered, "am I to understand however that you no longer intend to present yourself at the ball?"

"I regret that I consider it is still necessary for me to carry out my original plans."

"But it is the wish of a lady."

"The safety of another lady, to me the dearest on earth, is at stake."

"The honour of the archduchess herself is in peril, for she told me so and begged me to use this as a reason for turning you from your purpose only as a last resource. You doubtless wonder, Count, that she should have committed so much to such an unworthy individual as myself, but I will acquaint you with the fact that I have loved Her Highness passionately and without hope for four long years, as the meanest of mortals would worship the most beautiful and perfect of goddesses; this secret has been known alone by the archduchess, for it was too difficult to conceal it from her; for this reason and because she knows you are, whatever your political views may be, a man of honour, she has trusted me with this delicate mission."

"Von Rootzen," I exclaimed, "I must express my immeasurable regret that the orders of Her Highness cannot be obeyed. I fail moreover to

understand how my presence at the palace to-night can in any way compromise her."

Great beads of perspiration stood upon the forehead of the Captain of the Guard; he trembled with suppressed passion and shot a terrible glance at me.

"Count Adrian," he said in a hoarse but resolute voice, drawing his sword, "if the wishes of a sovereign, the honour of a woman of high estate are not sufficient reason for keeping you from this accursed ball to-night, I will oppose a stronger barrier. If you leave this room before I have your word of honour to obey the desire of the archduchess it must be over my inanimate body."

The situation was not one that caused me serious apprehension, for with all due regard to his well-known courage, I had seen Von Rootzen at sword play and felt that within a few minutes I could pass my sword through his heart; but I had no wish to kill the man or even injure him, violent as he had become, for many reasons. However great my personal dislike for him might be, he was evidently acting at present from the most chivalrous motives; moreover he was a great favourite of the archduke's, and sent as he had been by Her Highness, his death might make me a fresh enemy where at present I had a friend.

I decided to temporise.

"Is there no other course open?" I queried, "can you not again communicate with Her Highness? Possibly I can arrange to attend the ball and yet prevent any chance of a catastrophe."

"Nothing but your absence will suffice," was the reply.

"Then I fear," I said, now roused to anger, drawing my sword, "that it will be necessary for me to clear my path."

He awaited my onset with the stern look of a man who had determined to have his own way or die. Never have I seen expressed upon the face of anyone such fierce resolution; had his craft in fencing equalled his iron will my task would have been a hopeless one.

Our blades crossed.

It was my intention to attempt to disarm or merely disable him.

The emotions however, which had determined his course of action roused his abilities to their utmost. I found to my consternation that the task I had imposed upon myself was extremely difficult; indeed the rage and cunning of my opponent almost ended the affair in his favour, for, attacking me with a fury that drove me backwards, he suddenly darted sideways to his right, behind a small table. seized a heavy stool with his left hand and flung it at me with an upward movement. The action was so unexpected that I was unable to quite avoid the flying missile and one of the legs brushed me very slightly upon the side of the head, but not sufficiently hard to draw blood or even raise a bruise.

The unexpectedness of this disconcerted me and I was only able to parry a desperate lunge by a hair's breadth.

But the moment of apparent defeat resolved itself

into one of victory for me; the captain had made so certain of success that his recovery was weak and I thrust at his sword arm; as fate would have it however my antagonist slipped and received the weapon in his ribs, falling upon the ground in agony.

With I cry of mortification at the unintentional stroke I sprang towards him and raised his head to find that his senses were leaving him. He strove to speak but words would not come.

"I will send for a doctor," I said.

He shook his head gently to signify I thought that this was not what he meant.

At last with a mighty effort he gasped, "Tell—," and again collapsed.

"Tell whom?" I asked, "the archduchess?"

He shook his head again. A pallor stole over his countenance as his lips vainly endeavoured to frame a word.

"Whom shall I tell, Von Rootzen?" I said once more.

He made another effort, then shaken by a spasm fell back fainting.

At least I had removed the obstacle; but what would be the result?

Sorrowfully I summoned my servants and ordered them to procure a doctor instantly: one lived close to the house. As soon as he appeared and I had received his report, which was that Van Rootzen might die, I placed the unfortunate captain in his charge and set off without furthur delay to the palace.

I was at first determined to acquaint the archduke with the death of his officer then I recalled the instructions of His Highness that I was under no circumstances to communicate with him during the evening. Was this one of the events which he had foreseen? Surely not, for he had assured me that my life was safe and that the last thing desired by his enemies was my death, but if ever murder had been the intention of anyone it had certainly been that of the Captain of the Guard, who lay perhaps ill unto death upon the bed in my house. I decided however to obey my instructions, which were precise, and not mention the matter to the archduke, more especially as the attempt to stop me had failed and His Highness' plans were not interfered with.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BAL MASQUE

The delay caused by the entry of the Captain of the Guard with the subsequent developments, at the last moment had made me too late to witness the opening ceremony. I arrived quite ten minutes behind time, much to my annoyance, for His Highness' love of punctuality amounted to an absurdity and any laxity upon the part of his courtiers was met by him with marked disfavour. Upon this occasion especially I knew that my absence would cause him the greatest vexation.

As I entered he stood near the door of the ball-room, deep in conversation with his wife, both being in ordinary costume and unmasked; my appearance instantly attracted his attention but beneath his obvious annoyance I saw a look of relief; he dismissed me with a few words and I mixed with the gay throng. The archduchess appeased harassed as she uttered her words of welcome and did not recognise me.

Both their Highnesses loved gaiety, and social functions of every description enlivened court life in Bremlauz. Masked balls were of frequent occurrence and were no small aid to the opportunities the immorality of the age demanded.

My eyes wandered amidst the crowd with its

kaleidoscopic variations of light and colour, seeking for the sign of the white bow, or some face that I could recognise beneath the velvet masks of every description; the dominos, in which at least half the guests were disguised being of course inscrutable.

I wondered what new surprise this ever increasing mystery would have in store for me and whether it was useless to hope that the next few hours would deliver Marguerite safely into my keeping.

I swore that once I held possession of her we would be united as quickly as priest could be procured to perform the ceremony, in order that I might have the right to guard her securely. Strive as I would however the sense of impending disaster would not be dismissed. My thoughts must have affected my bearing for I saw many of the maskers looking in my direction, and endeavoured to control my feelings.

At that moment my eyes caught sight of a white bow upon the left arm of a grey domino. I pursued it and touched the owner.

The mask turned and scrutinised me, then seeing the white bow in his turn on my arm, said, "The Chateau."

The voice was that of Rudolph.

"The inn at Orsavo," I replied, "but, Count Rudolph, there is an explanation due to me," I continued as soon as I had recovered from my surprise.

"There is an explanation," he said, "if such the reply of a lifelong friend to one who has wronged

him more than words can express, one who has violated all the most sacred principles of love and friendship can be termed. But can you, dare you stand, guilty as you are of crimes almost too terrible to reflect upon, and still plotting more heinous ones, and calmly ask for an explanation? Believe me, were it not for my oath, here in the ballroom, surrounded by these mummers, you should receive the punishment you so deeply merit, even if the administration ensured my own doom. To-morrow you shall receive the desired answer."

"And have you nothing to communicate now?" I asked; "will you not at least let me know the name of my accuser?"

"Nothing. You are your own accuser?" he observed coldly, moving away, apparently almost choking at what he seemed to consider the cool insolence of a ruffian. Was he acting a part? If not I thought I would have given much to know who had roused his suspicions against me.

I watched his form mix with the dancers and then moved towards the wall jostling in my abstraction several couples and receiving abuse for carelessness.

As I reached my destination I felt a hand upon my shoulders.

A green domino stood at my side, upon his arm was the white bow.

We exchanged signs.

The green domino was Von Meinter, the recognition was mutual and without a word he strode from my side to disappear in his turn in the crowd.

Was his opinion of me the same as Rudolph's? Did this sudden departure imply fear or disgust? A fierce excitement took possession of me, a mad longing to probe the mystery. I felt as though my brain would burst if the suspense were prolonged. And yet upon me slowly but surely was creeping a horror that I had but guessed its nature—but this is the one subject my whole being recoils from and at the most vague recollection of which my brain sickens.

As Von Meinter disappeared the now well-known silvery voice of a woman said gently, in laughing tones, "Count Adrian does not appear to care for dancing to-night."

The eyes of Madame du Soissons glanced from beneath a red domino. She wore no white bow but had apparently recognised me by mine.

"Madame," I replied, "you know why I do not dance. What can it advantage you to delight in the agony of an individual, who, as far as he is aware, did you no harm until you interfered with him."

"And supposing, Count," she answered, "that I tell you I can no more explain the present terrible situation than yourself, that if I dared to give the matter consideration, to allow it a lodging-place in my brain, it would send me mad: there are some things too horrible for contemplation, under such circumstances, if no action can be taken, and one has the capacity, there remains only one thing to be done and that is to drive out the unpleasant thoughts by sheer force of will, to occupy oneself with more pleasant ideas and laugh in spite of misfortune

But the time has almost approached when you and I can both strike, then we may think and act; until that moment, Count, let me beg of you to keep up your courage and play the man as you have done throughout."

"And this moment——?"

"Will be at half past eleven to-night. You are of course acquainted with the summer house by the statue of the the archduke's father in the grounds of the palace?

It was fortunate that the mask hid my countenance or my face would have betrayed the astonishment I felt as I realised that the appointment practically coincided with that of the archduke. Possibly the plots which had so far run parallel to each other would affect a junction at this point with startling results. I sincerely hoped that such would be the case, for the strain was beginning to tell upon me. However, I fortunately little guessed even at that moment the terrible ordeal which the next few hours had in store for me.

"I will meet you without fail at the summer house," I replied.

"Then, au revoir," she murmured, and moved slowly away.

I watched the red domino, which concealed the dark-eyed beauty, whose appearance in my life had been accompanied by such disaster until it was lost amidst the glittering whirl from which emerged a few minutes later the form of the archduke himself.

Stopping for an instant at my side, he said aloud

in an ungracious manner, as though not recognising me, "You appear, sir, to be spending a joyless evening." In an undertone however he whispered, "Dance Man! dance! your bearing is that of an assassin, you will be watched and recognised."

Before I could reply he moved away and exchanging remarks with others was gradually lost to sight.

Cursing my stupidity for compelling the archduke to do the very thing which was most inadvisable, namely to address me in public, I found partners, and for an hour tried to forget the situation in the small talk that upon ordinary occasions would have come readily enough; but my wit failed me and disgusted I retired to a corner of the ballroom for a few moments' rest.

Suddenly my startled senses beheld a thing which held me spellbound, both from the remarkable nature of the event and from the complication of emotions which ensued at the manifestation. Walking slowly towards me and close to the wall in order to avoid the dancers were a man and a woman, in brown and white dominoes respectively; something in the action of the latter was very familiar, she looked in my direction, stared for a few seconds, then raised her domino! the face I saw was that of Marguerite. The action attracted the attention of the man, who turned in time to see my love's movement and that I had observed it. He seized her arm and dragged her into one of the many retiring rooms, which was close at hand.

Did the brown domino cover the features of the mysterious man who had abducted Marguerite from Maros? I felt it did. In the first place as I said before I was spellbound by the suddenness of this appearance, in the second, I had been for several years a soldier under an autocratic ruler and accustomed to obey orders; thus when my senses had recovered from the shock I remembered my instructions from the archduke to take no action under any circumstances that might arise; for a few moments the emotion of obedience cultivated during my own lifetime and through the experiences of innumerable ancestors, conquered, or rather strove with the great passion of my life. It was only for a few moments; for my love would not stand the test; then I walked towards the door as rapidly as could be done without attracting the attention of anyone.

It had been closed. I opened it and found myself in a fairly large room, which to my consternation was empty save for a few lounges and chairs. There were four doorways leading from this compartment counting the one I had entered. I tried the three others in turn, they were all locked and the keys missing.

With a groan I sank upon one of the lounges and gave way to the despair which threatened to unsettle my reason.

I was recalled to my surroundings by a voice, that of General von Graubler.

"Count," he said, "you have my sympathy, but surely there is a better way of bearing grief than

abandoning oneself to it in this fashion. I have been searching for you the whole evening with the hope of obtaining a few moments' conversation, but your disguise was so perfect that it was only when my attention was attracted by the sound of your voice as you made that remark to yourself whilst walking towards this room that I recognised you."

"I was not aware that I made any remark," I answered, "but did you not observe who entered this doorway, the persons that I was pursuing?

"I saw no one."

His disguise unfortunately shielded him. Was he speaking the truth? It was quite possible however that he had not seen Marguerite, and had, as he said, been attracted by an exclamation of mine. There was no white bow upon his arm.

"You asked me," he said, "for some information when you came to my house and I was too much annoyed at your behaviour then to answer you, I have since however—"

At that instant a sonorous voice roared from some portion of the room, "*Remember Prague*!"

The general trembled so violently that I thought he would have fallen and I sprang up to save him, but he recovered himself and with a sweeping glance of terror rushed from the room and re-entered the ballroom.

I was about to follow and demand some reason for his behaviour from him, but remembered the instructions not to create a scene which I had already broken in intention. I searched the room for explanation of the voice; there was no one

concealed beneath any of the lounges however and no sign of any openings other than the keyholes of the doorways.

I therefore listlessly retraced my footsteps to the ballroom, in which I had not been ten minutes before I was accosted by a black domino.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GARDENS OF THE PALACE

I glanced at the left shoulder of the man who had addressed me; he wore no white bow, and was short, thick-set and alert of movement.

"I have some friends, Count," he said, "who are most anxious to exchange a few words with you; the atmosphere of the ballroom is too heated for the calm deliberation this meeting will require from all concerned in it; they have therefore requested me to ask you to be good enough to inconvenience yourself to the extent of stepping into the grounds for a few moments."

"Evidently," I said to myself, "the proceedings which the archduke expected are about to develop."

"I am at your service," I answered.

"Have you no fear?" he questioned.

"What is there to fear in the palace grounds?" I answered.

"Certainly not," the man replied, "but a little caution, considering what has happened within the last few days might have been forgiven; however, be good enough to follow me."

He led the way through a magnificent conservatory filled with plants and flowers into the grounds without; the contrast between the warmth

we had just left and the cold autumn night roused afresh the sense of impending evil in me; a rank smell arose from the rotting leaves, whilst through a trellis work of almost bare boughs a watery moon threw a dull light over the grounds, making the numerous statues appear as though denizens of the spirit world.

Occasionally my companion stopped and cast swift apprehensive glances around him as if fearing we might be followed, behaviour which did not tend to allay my unpleasant sensations.

"A cheerless night," he said, reading my thoughts, "but our business will be quickly dispatched. If we keep to this path it will soon bring us to the neighbourhood of the fountain."

We reached our destination and through the trees I discerned dimly the form of the fountain, which was not then discharging any water.

The black domino glanced hastily around to make sure that we were unobserved, then whistled softly.

There were the sounds of footsteps upon the leaves, and two other revellers stood before me, both in brown dominoes. It struck me that I had noticed no one at the ball so tall as the foremost of the two; a thought flashed into my brain, was I in the presence of the archduke's brother William? His first words assured me that I was correct.

"You probably do not recognise in me one of your assailants of yesterday," he said in a disguised voice.

"I certainly recollect," I replied, "a tall in-

dividual who remained concealed in a doorway whilst his four friends attacked me.

My interlocutor made an impatient gesture.

"In sending for you to-night," he contined, "I am running a great risk. I have formed definite plans, and the only thing which deters me from carrying them out is the thought that you may fall an innocent victim through their accomplishment. I have no desire that your blood should be upon my hands. I am also not your enemy. To-night's events will bring you face to face with this man and it remains with you to revenge yourself for all you have suffered."

"And who is this individual?" I demanded.

"Will you swear, upon you honour, not to divulge his name in the event of your not taking the course we propose?" questioned the disguised prince.

"I can take no oath," I answered.

A growl of dissatisfaction emanated from the throats of the other two men.

"But if I tell you that the man I refer to, you have completely trusted, that he has foully betrayed you, is the cause of all your troubles and has not the slightest claim upon your consideration: that to-night it must be either your death or his; that in the former event he will obtain the woman for whose release you have so nobly striven."

"I must again refuse to take this oath," I answered. "What proof have I that you are speaking the truth? Because five strangers attack me one evening, allow me to escape, and then upon the next

night lure me into this garden, am I to follow their suggestion that I should kill a man whom they choose to accuse of crimes of which they themselves are perhaps the perpetrators? If you have nothing further to say to me, gentleman, I will return to the ballroom."

Evidently this or something similar had been foreseen by the archduke. I had at least obtained part of the information required by His Highness. Did he know that I would be requested to murder someone? Had these men arranged any other schemes to be used in the event of my refusal?

They conversed in whispers, the two men, both of whom no doubt formed part of the gang which had attacked me on the previous night, seemed to be urging something upon the prince, which he seemed averse to accept.

At he last turned once more.

"Notwithstanding your obstinacy, Count," he said, "for which perhaps you may have good grounds, I have decided to make one more effort to save you from the doom which threatens you. I will tell you the name of your implacable enemy, when perhaps your own reason will guide you in seeing the true significance of recent events. The man who has determined upon your ruin and death is the archduke himself.

"His Highness!" I ejaculated.

"His Highness," echoed William.

"And what are his motives for this extraordinary persecution?" I queried, attempting to get as much information as possible.

"That I do not know, but of this I am certain, that it will be to your advantage to do as I have suggested and kill him.

"I am no assassin, gentlemen," I replied, "and do not not believe your tale.

"If you persist in your determination, you will as I said before assuredly die; acquiescence with my plans will ensure your finacée being returned safely to you to-morrow.

I reviewed carefully all the preceding events of the strange drama which was being enacted, seeking to find some point which would lend colour to the suggestion of the man before me. Rudolph, Von Meinter, the archduchess, Marguerite's guardian, any of these might desire my death: the unknowns, Von Waldeau, the Captain of the Guard had attempted it. The archduke, when he might have pressed the charge of conspiracy, and his brother also had held my life in their hands and spared it; decidedly I had nothing to fear from either of them. I could see no reason for disobeying the instructions given me by His Highness, certainly none for thinking it was necessary to kill him in order to save Marguerite from misery and my own life from his hand.

That my view was fortunate will appear hereafter.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I have already given you my decision, at least I can be true to the character of my ancestors, who of all things abhorred vacillation; the die is cast, I have but one earthly master and him I intend to serve.

"If you insist," he said, "in your obstinacy, I

wish you good-night and goodbye; remember only when the black face of death appears that I warned you and acted for your good. For this reason I beg that the conversation may be kept a secret."

I bowed to the three and returned to the ballroom, wondering vaguely what further thing would transpire upon this eventful evening. As I entered, my glance encountered the form of the archduchess who was speaking to a blue domino. She fixed upon me a look of entreaty and signalled to me to approach. I did so: the domino received a dismissal and departed.

"Count," she murmured, "I have only recently been told that you were here, my informant gave me a means of recognising you. I have but a moment. You have disobeyed the instructions of my messenger."

I murmured an apology.

"Let me conjure you," she whispered, "in the name of all you hold dear to leave this accursed ballroom. You cannot save the woman you love; why sacrifice yourself? Fly! fly! there is yet time. Your existence will be crushed by the greater destinies of others who are using you and yours for their own vile ends; you are the fulcrum which must yield beneath the stress of gigantic opposing forces. I can remain with you no longer, but Count Adrian, believe me, for," and her whisper became almost inaudible, "I love you."

"I cannot," I murmured, "there are duties which must be performed."

The eyes of all the dancers in the vicinity were

upon us. Whilst wondering whether I was justified in giving her the news of her messenger's probable fate, she passed from me, murmuring as she left a few words of expostulation, a radiant vision, to others the same cold, haughty daughter of generations of kings and emperors, to me a beautiful enigma, suggesting many curious hypotheses. So deeply was I occupied with these thoughts that the time advanced to within ten minutes of the hour of my appointment with the masked woman before I again became conscious of my surroundings. There were now no signs of any white bows amidst the whirling crowd.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT WAS REVEALED IN THE SUMMER HOUSE

The fateful hour was fast approaching. From this period the most appalling events moved forward with frightful rapidity. The horror of the intangible mystery increased tenfold; as each manifestation succeeded the other, I felt that the possibility of wresting the truth had at last been accorded me only to be confronted with fresh misery and terror.

As before stated, my actions, may perhaps, viewed calmly in the light of after events, not have always been the logical course, but excitement and other strong emotions are always liable to distort the judgment. Upon several occasions problems of considerable magnitude had to be decided instantaneously.

For one thing, it will be seen and must be borne in mind that the honour of two women was at stake. It seemed to me that it was my duty to unhesitatingly sacrifice that of one should it prove necessary to do so in order to save that of the other. I knew nothing definitely, and although feeling it was my duty to protect the fair fame of the highest lady in the land, dare not risk anything likely to compromise the woman I loved.

As I walked down the avenue of almost leafless

trees, which led to the little summer house, situated in a rarely frequented portion of the grounds, the very atmosphere seemed charged with expectancy; the slightest rustle of leaves became magnified by my distorted fancy; shadows became beings and the sighings of the wind seemed to be the whisperings of a multitude.

The sense of impending calamity hovering over me increased in its intensity; never before had I so dreaded solitude and longed for a friend, a strong brave heart, with no selfish interests, that could be relied upon in the hour of trial which I felt was bearing down upon me. How far would the archduke sacrifice me from his own ends? Had the danger been such as I could comprehend, even though the odds were hopelessly overwhelming I could have advanced with a firm heart and met the foe calmly, even if with the courage of despair; but the awful uncertainty and mystery chilled me.

The arbour, barely visible during the summer months, hidden as it was then by foliage, suddenly appeared at the end of the avenue, a dark mass in the moonlight. Between it and the end of the avenue was a small pond, in the centre of which stood a marble statue, from the mouth of which in the hot weather a stream of water issued, six smaller images on the border threw jets towards the centre; the moon was mirrored on the glistening surface of the water. It was an eerie spot at best, although under ordinary circumstances I would not have given the dismal prospect a thought.

As I approached there was no sign of any human being; I was I knew a few minutes late, but did not believe that Madame du Soissons would take offence at that or return without the interview she herself had sought. I paced slowly forward, listening and watching intently. Suddenly from the direction of a clump of trees a rotten branch snapped. I knew the sound well, someone walking had stepped upon it. I ran to the spot from whence the noise had proceeded and found the broken branch, but there was no sign of the stealthy watcher; and I retired towards the summer house.

As I walked to the door, watching the tree tops sway to the fitful gusts of wind, a sudden belief came over me that the house contained some awful thing. I stopped, the strange prescience held me irresolute upon the threshold. I called Madame du Soissons by name, but save for the sighing of the wind there was not a sound. I cursed the weakness which my experiences and lack of rest had caused and with an effort sprang forward into the arbour.

My eyes fell upon a fearsome sight. The moonlight streamed through the window upon the figure of a woman which was half sitting and half reclining against the woodwork; it fell upon her face, ghastly white and rigid, the eyes of which glared with terror.

Madame du Soissons had indeed arrived, for it was she.

Protruding from her breast was the hilt of an

Italian dagger, at her feet was a dark pool; without doubt she was dead, pierced to the heart. Close to her upon the floor lay a white indefinable mass.

I stepped forward with a cry; for the domino worn by Marguerite was white; what thing was I to behold and what further mystery was about to be revealed? Had all my patient endurance led me but to the thing I feared? I hesitated to take the action which would reassure me or seal for ever my unutterable misery.

With a faint and beating heart I bent to examine the mass of drapery.

Shocked as I was, my first sensations were mingled with those of relief; at least it was not Marguerite; if the machinations of the murderous conspiracy which was destroying the existences of so many were responsible for this fresh outrage the victim was not my loved one.

It was the archduchess who lay at my feet; close to her was the red domino worn by Madame du Soissons. Her Highness had merely fainted. What frightful tragedy had occurred?

As I looked I saw something lying close to the hand of the archduchess, which had evidenly fallen from her grasp; it was a dagger in its sheath. I was dumbfounded. Had the archduchess committed this act? If Her Highness had murdered the friend of her husband, why had she executed the deed with the dead woman's own dagger. Had these women met in order to fight in this quiet spot? Why also had I been summoned? Why

had the archduke agreed to meet here at this time? Was he aware of the impending tragedy when he made the appointment, or was it a coincidence?

I obtained some water and flung it upon the face of Her Highness. Although regretting it, I did not feel justified in leaving the place for other means of reviving her.

The theory of a duel by appointment or even a quarrel following upon a pre-arranged meeting did not appear to meet the facts of the case, for if the first suggestion were true, why was one dagger in its sheath? and as regards the second idea, assuming that the dagger held by the archduchess had been brought to the summer house originally by the dead woman, I could see no reason for Her Highness taking possession of the weapon after Madame du Soissons death. It was of course possible that at the moment of striking, the dagger held by the dead woman had been seized to prevent any possible chance of retaliation. There was a possibility that the archduchess had wrested the dagger from the woman and killed her with it, this was however not likely. Had Madame du Soissons killed herself? Had Her Highness merely come upon the body by chance? Why then did she hold the dagger?

The archduchess had referred to her honour being at stake through the Captain of the Guard; she had told me that she loved me. I tried to frame a fresh theory, taking as a basis this love which I had so recently become acquainted with and attempting to find some possible solution of the

riddle in this form, involved as it was with the presence and death of Madame du Soissons, the archduke's order to me to be present at midnight, and the warning of William; but the entire situation was so complicated that I again decided that as yet the clue of the great secret was not within my grasp. I felt I was placed in a great dilemma, but could think of nothing that I had done which would compromise Her Highness. What was my duty under the circumstances? To leave the archduchess here was perhaps to expose a possibly innocent woman to the fury of her husband, who might be too excited to calmly judge; to take her away and leave His Highness in ignorance might mean that the archduke would lack some clue which would prevent him from defeating his enemies and consequently cause the loss of my loved one. One course that suggested itself to me was to take the archduchess to a place of safety, listen to the explanations of the archduke, and if I considered that the knowledge was material to his success acquaint him with the facts of the tragedy; in any case I thought on the following day when he was calmer, all the facts could be brought before him. But my instructions were to report all circumstances that occurred to His Highness; I could afford to take no risks, as I had found the bodies so they should remain. If the archduchess had committed crimes she must pay the penalty. To attempt to shield her at this moment, blinded as I was by mystery, seemed to me to court destruction for Marguerite; to expose those whose puppets my

love and I had been, to each other appeared the correct and only course: if she were innocent I must do my best to defend her.

The above thoughts occupied a very short space of time, for my brain was roused by excitement.

I once more examined the body of the murdered woman and stooped over the prostrate figure to scrutinise the handle of the weapon which had wrought her doom. It was a quaint piece of workmanship in silver, dating from the twelfth century. There were many such in the houses of the old nobility, the dagger having been used at one time as a light weapon on state occasions. Had Her Highness wished to obtain such, she could have found half a dozen in the armoury of the palace.

From the dagger my eyes wandered to the dead face of the once beautiful woman; her bright dress ill-accorded with the look of awful terror in the fixed dark eyes; her tresses had escaped from their bonds and framed a picture pitiful and fearful.

I turned away, and as I did so my eyes encountered a ring lying in the moonlight. It was a man's, set with one large diamond and surrounded by rubies. I stooped down and picked up the gem, feeling that I had at last discovered a valuable clue. I placed it in my pocket and was about to search for other possible articles when suddenly the sound of a firm footfall fell upon my ears. I turned swiftly to behold a figure in the doorway.

It was that of the masked man who had abducted Marguerite, and shot at me in the garden of the

Chateau of Maros, dressed as he was then, in clothes resembling mine.

CHAPTER XXV

FACE TO FACE WITH THE UNKNOWN

"At last," I murmured, drawing my sword. At the recollection of the untold misery this sinister presence had caused me a savage fury arose within my breast and caused the blood to surge swiftly through my veins. I forget all my instructions and was about to precipitate myself upon the unknown conscious only of the fact that at last the great opportunity for which I had so arduously toiled awaited me. I decided to attempt to disarm the man and compel him to tell me where Marguerite was. The warning of the archduke would have passed unheeded were it not that my eyes fell upon the unknown's left shoulder; upon it rested the white bow.

I paused.

Was this man one of us? Was I to believe, after all that had passed, he was to be reckoned amongst my friends? Would the wonders of this enigma never cease? But there was another test, possibly he had obtained possession of a bow by some means, was he however acquainted with the other signs?

A low mocking laugh greeted me.

"You hesitate, sir," said a strange voice, resembling that of the coachman.

With an effort I restrained my passion and gave the sign.

"The chateau," I said.

Again the mocking laugh answered me.

"The chateau, do you not hear me?" I enquired hoarsely.

"I hear you, sir," the unnatural voice responded, "some stupid reveller's sign I presume: you are mistaken, I am not here upon pleasure; I have come on business, to kill you in fact."

I laughed then, a low joyous cry, for I was at liberty to fight one who intended to kill me; this man was my prey, to my hand had fallen the task of crushing the villain who had so ruthlessly destroyed my happiness. My only fear was that the archduke would arrive before I had wreaked my vengeance. Then I thought that if by chance I killed him I would be unable to obtain news of my love. To attempt to get this unless the man were in my power I knew to be useless, but I decided to make one effort.

"The fewer words the better," I said, "I, Count Adrian, demand from you the instant restoration of the Countess Linzorf and an explanation of your atrocious conduct."

"And I," the masked man replied, in the same strange voice, "refuse to answer you and demand in my turn from you the name of the ruthless murderer of Madame du Soissons, who lies dead by your side, or is that too much to ask from you?"

From where he stood the archduchess was invisible, being hidden by a large wooden table.

The tone the last few words were spoken in and the accent he laid upon the end one maddened me and I rushed savagely upon him.

He had drawn his sword when I unsheathed mine.

"At last! at last! foul murderer," I raved. From the utmost depths of my nature like mighty giants rose all the ferocious passions of my manhood, ready to rend, to tear limb from limb, the monster whose unrelenting viciousness had turned me from a civilised being into a primeval man: the lust for blood seized me and flinging my domino from me I pressed savagely upon my foe.

He retreated into the open space near the fountain, meeting my physical attack skilfully. The resistless fury of my onset drove him around and around the small circle formed by the stone edge of the fountain. He made no reply to my remarks, contenting himself with sarcastic laughter and waiting apparently for the moment when my savage onslaught should exhaust me. Had we been in some confined space I could have forced the issue, as it was he was skilful swordsman enough to prolong such tactics indefinitely.

I taunted him with cowardice but received no answer.

At length the strain commenced to tell upon me and I decided to abate my fury pending the return of my strength, for I felt that should I continue to the point of exhaustion and my opponent prove to be as skilful in attack as in defence, I should be at his mercy.

Soon we paused panting and glaring at each other. I sought every possible means to obtain some hints as to the identity of the wonderful stranger, the most finished swordsman that it had ever fallen to my lot to behold. I had never imagined that such strength of wrist could exist. He on his part, although not so distressed as myself, had gladly availed himself of the few seconds, respite, but was recovering rapidly and exhibited all the symptoms of intending to speedily renew the combat.

"You still appear fatigued," he said grimly.

"The chasing of a deer makes the steed breathless," I laughed.

"Say rather the hound," was the prompt rejoinder.

Goaded by his repartee I again attacked. This time the unknown stood his ground.

At Paris, two years before, I had wounded Monsieur Charenton in the breast with a subtle stroke taught me by my father. I waited for the right moment and lunged.

'I myself taught your father that attack," said my adversary, parrying it easily. "There is a counter movement which appears to be unknown to you or it would surely never have been risked with a swordsman of any ability."

I ground my teeth. At least I thought the thrust which the Italian taught my cousin was known only to four persons, one learnt it at the moment of his decease, the other had since died, the third was myself.

"You have another masterpiece I observe," said the unknown; "unfortunately you face the moonlight and there are some countenances too expressive for the benefit of their owners."

A moment later I feinted, parried, feinted again, then shot forward my arm hoping to feel the welcome sensation of the steel meeting my adversary's body.

But I had not calculated upon one thing, the great strength of my adversary's wrist; with a movement which would have been utterly impossible for one of ordinary power, he wrenched my weapon from my hand with his sword.

"There are four schools in Europe," said my terrible antagonist, "you have apparently learned in three, try that of Spain, you will then learn the value of counter attack and ask for nothing better than that your opponents advances shall be as complicated as possible. Pick up your weapon, Count Adrian, for I wish to give you a lesson in the art of fencing: your education appears to have been sadly neglected."

I again grasped my sword.

I was drenched with perspiration and completely humiliated. Had I been asked previously to the encounter, although not I hope a braggart, I should have been compelled to admit that I considered myself one of the most expert swordsmen in Austria. In the hands of this man I was a child. But such thoughts, painful as they were to one who loved to excel in manly arts, were drowned in the agonising contemplation of the certainty that

the mask could if he wished leave me and that I had not the power to stop and wrest the secret from him. The opportunity had presented itself and I, poor weakling, had been too feeble a being to avail myself of it.

In my folly I had dreaded that the archduke might appear and rob me of my right of punishment; now I would have given all my possessions for the immediate advent of His Highness and the friends he would probably bring. My eyes glanced impatiently in all directions. Why did he tarry?

"You are expecting someone," said the mask, "but he will not come; for once the Archduke of Bremlauz has overreached himself, he has elected to play chess and has lost the game, for he has been throughout, one move too late."

Then there was no hope, upon me and me alone had rested the failure or success of the conspiracy which had swept all before it. What terrible drama had occurred? What had become of the archduke? Who was this man before me? Not William, that I could swear, for he lacked three inches of that prince's height.

Marguerite, my poor love, was helpless, she relied of course upon the strength of my arm to deliver her and it had failed. But it should not; if this man's death could only be accomplished at the expense of my own existence, the sacrifice should be made willingly; to fight with a man, the main idea being the preservation of one's own life is a totally different matter from a combat in which the primary object is the death of the opponent,

more especially when personal safety is regarded as a pawn which may be lightly sacrificed at the price of certain annihilation of the adversary.

I hoped that at some period of the coming contest there might arise a moment when if I chose to throw myself upon my adversary's sword, I could at the same time inflict a mortal wound in return. With such a resolve I again faced the masked man.

For one moment the thought of all that I was leaving, youth, wealth, power, threw their weight into the scales against my action; but life at the price was valueless, there was some hope that my voluntary death would save her I loved.

Then a low, startled cry fell upon my ears and my eyes involuntarily turned towards the sound. The archduchess stood in the doorway, of the summer house her eyes wide with terror; as I gazed she fainted again and collapsed upon the ground.

The unknown was about to take the attack. With a loud laugh he advanced. I was certain that, in the hands of this cunning fiend who confronted me, I was utterly powerless to preserve my existence and defeat him. To the accompaniment of low laughter and mocking taunts he absolutely forced my weapon from my positions of defence, amusing himself by lightly pricking me over vulnerable places with the point of his weapon. He was playing with me.

"That, sir," he said, touching me in the thigh, "would not have been a mortal wound, but might

undoubtedly have caused you to spend several weeks in bed. You observed the feint which preceded it?"

"That," he said lightly striking me over the heart, "you most decidedly never would have recovered from. By the way, that is my favourite point."

I thought of the words used by Madame du Soissons in the old chateau when she was about to kill me in mistake for the colonel: "I fancy that if my whole weight is thrown upon the weapon I can make sure of your favourite point, the heart." Was this then Von Heiner? If so, how had I offended him? Was it not enough that my life had nearly been forfeited for his? How could this mystery be explained?

"And that," he continued placing his sword a fraction of an inch from my throat, would also probably have ended your existence."

But at last an opportunity presented itself. I had thought as I have said that if I deliberately hurled myself upon my opponent's sword, the novelty of the movement would for certain take him by surprise. He occasionally returned his weapon to a position in which the point was comparatively speaking close to himself. I decided that at the moment of his commencing to withdraw the weapon I would throw myself towards it and at the same time strike him with my own to the heart.

The moment arrived. I sprang forward ready to kill and be killed; but with a movement swift as thought, my antagonist, who had apparently

realised that such a stratagem might possibly be adopted by me, and was fully prepared for it, lowered his weapon, sprang to the side and seized my sword arm with his left arm. Exhausted as I was, the unexpected failure of my last resource completed my discomfiture, for I had made no effort to recover from a possible failure, not deeming such could occur.

For an instant the glaring eyes, glittering from behind the mask, stared into mine, then I felt a terrific blow upon the peak of the jaw, a sensation of shock . . . all was darkness . . . and I became unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE REMOVAL OF THE MASK

When Count Adrian regained his senses it was to find himself seated in a beautifully furnished, candle-lit studio, and held firmly in a huge wooden armchair by a powerful iron bar, which passed around his waist.

His head still throbbed violently from the effects of the blow.

The room was magnificently furnished, matching the ceiling, which was executed in white and gold and formed a pleasing contrast to the black arras.

Half standing, half resting against a small ebony table of fantastic shape stood the count's enemy, with folded arms, glaring down upon the unlucky man, his mask still unremoved.

At sight of him the temporary faintness caused by the terrific blow he had received completely fled, and Adrian endeavoured to rise, only to be reminded of the fact that he was a helpless prisoner.

The unknown laughed, that strange, horrid cachinnation the count had heard before; he clenched his hand in impotent rage.

"Egotist," at last shot from the lips of the tormentor in his unnatural voice.

The count threw a look of enquiry at the speaker.

"You do not quite appreciate my remark," said the unknown.

"I do not."

"Well, I will explain; for the last few days you have been pursuing a lady. Is this not so?"

"It is."

"You have done so without being quite certain whether this lady really desired your society. My remarks annoy you I see, but I can assure you that far from wishing for your attentions, the recipient finds them positively odious."

"You lie, sir," ejaculated Count Adrian, almost choking with passion.

"Suppose, however," continued the unknown, "that I prove my statement?"

"You cannot."

"Nothing I assure you is easier. Fortunately the lady herself is at hand and within the next few moments I guarantee that we will agree upon this point, and you will admit the absurdity of risking your life in order to rescue a person from a position which is the reverse of distasteful to her.

So saying the unknown walked slowly to the other end of the room, pushed aside the black tapestry and disappeared behind a door.

The count awaited his return in mental torture. The details of the strange room with its furniture impressed themselves deeply upon his consciousness, roused as it was by expectation to a state of great receptivity. In the centre stood a big easel supporting a very large veiled canvas, facing it was something that resembled an ancient altar, upon

which was strewn a quantity of skins. Scattered in all directions about the apartment were antique ornaments and pieces of furniture dating from the days of Ancient Greece. The floor was constructed of mosaic work, and the whole presented the appearance of being owned by an artist with a passion for collecting valuable curiosities.

There was a sound, the tapestry was again brushed aside, and, leaning upon the arm of the unknown, Marguerite walked slowly towards the count, who awaited his lost love with mixed and powerful emotions.

For a few moments no one spoke.

Then the masked man said, "Count Adrian, the Countess Linzorf stands before you: have you nothing to ask her?"

The unhappy man gripped the arm of his chair. Was this awful thing true then? His eyes sought the brown orbs of his intended bride; they gazed tenderly and tearfully down upon him as he endeavoured to receive from their lustrous depths as from some magic dark pools the explanation of the mystery that tortured him.

"You hesitate still," said the masked man with a grating laugh.

"Marguerite," asked the count with an effort, "do you no longer love me?"

The girl answered quickly but mechanically, "I do not."

"Is it true that my efforts to release you cause you annoyance?"

She shuddered, but without removing her eyes

from his replied, "I do not wish to leave my protector."

"Your protector?"

"Yes," answered the unknown, "her protector. Marguerite, my love, place your arms around my neck and let me seal in the presence of Count Adrian, the troth we have pledged to each other."

As Marguerite raised her arms, the count unable to bear the sight, averted his eyes; the kiss rang in his ears like a musket shot and he started as though wounded, then stared with an expressionless gaze; his face might have been carved in marble.

So this then was the result of his trust and self-sacrifice. He had risked life itself for a worthless creature, who not only did not value his love, but flaunted her own for another in the face of the man who had endured so much for her sake.

Was it pity she felt for him? pity that he had read in her glance in the dining hall of the ruined chateau: truly a strange sympathy. Oh, why had the poison been insufficient? Surely it would have been more merciful to have completed that day's work! better a thousand fold thus than to have lived to witness this scene!

"Leave me!" he said suddenly, stung to madness by the bitterness of his lot.

"Then you are satisfied?" said the unknown.

"More than satisfied," replied the count, "henceforth enjoy the prize I no longer envy you; believe me, I wish you no greater harm than such a possession."

There was a loud cry; both men looked towards

Marguerite; she was weeping wildly; the unknown seized her in his strong arms and bore her from the room.

For the first time throughout the whole of his awful days of trial the count nearly broke down; his iron strength of will almost collapsed before this last terrible ordeal and he felt as though he would like to sob like a little child. Then choking the emotion he resolved that he would at least put on a brave front before his enemy.

Within a few moments the latter returned, threw himself upon a divan, and to the astonishment of the count gave way to a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Adrian gazed at first curiously upon him, but his look changed to one of horror; a terrible suspicion was beginning to take shape in his brain.

With a bound the unknown sprang to his feet and in a couple of strides stood once more before the count.

"Do you not recognise the masked man?" he queried with a savage chuckle.

Something familiar in the manner of the unknown appealed to the count, but it was very vague.

"Think again, Count Adrian, I will aid you a little and take the mask from my voice first. Listen! What is the countersign? 'The Chateau.'"

"Ha!" cried Adrian, "the archduke himself! it cannot be!"

The unknown threw the large mask from his face, it was indeed the Archduke of Bremlauz who stood revealed, and once more his frame was shaken

by a paroxysm of wild laughter which made the blood of the count run cold.

"You wonder, Count, why the Archduke of Bremlauz has arranged this strange meeting under such curious circumstances, do you not? Were you ever aware, my dear sir that His Highness was an artist?"

"I was not," said the count shuddering; he was a brave man, but the growing comprehension of this thing was calculated to appal the stoutest heart. "Not only an artist," said His Highness, "but one destined to be immortalised by the profession which I have adopted. As a petty potentate, within a generation of my demise my existence will be forgotten; as the painter I shall live until memory becomes extinct."

The glittering rolling eyes and the strange working of the fingers fascinated the bound man.

"I will show you something," the archduke cried advancing to the easel, slowly turning it round and flinging back the covering over the canvas. The picture of a woman was revealed, lying upon an altar and apparently about to be sacrificed to the gods by a priest; it was almost life sized. The model for the head had been that of the Countess Linzorf.

The count gazed in fresh wonderment, his glance appealing to the archduke's grim humour; he chuckled again with delight.

"I am, as you will admit later, Count," said His Highness, "a most enthusiastic student of my profession and have laboured for some years at the

idea of a young female being offered to the gods as a sacrifice, but have always been dissatisfied with the results; there are a dozen of them piled in that corner behind you and twice that number have been destroyed; they lacked realism in one thing, namely the expression of the eyes."

"I conceived a brilliant idea; why not make the painting from life or rather at the division line between that and death."

"Monster," gasped the count, in whose brain horrible conjectures had now shaped themselves into a fixed idea: he knew that he was in the presence of a ferocious madman. His position and that of the unfortunate countess again forced themselves upon him and he strained in impotent anguish at the iron bonds.

"A fiancée," continued the lunatic, "within a short period of her wedding would make a most interesting model, there would be so many emotions to stir the last expression. After numerous enquiries and much deliberation and principally because the type of face possessed by the Countess Linzorf appeared to me to be suitable for the picture, I selected your beloved Marguerite."

The count clenched his fists in agony; there was much to be explained, but was he dreaming?

Was not the whole thing some frightful nightmare from which he would awake shortly with a feeling of unutterable relief that it had all been a vision?

The light shone upon the mocking smile and gleaming teeth of the madman; the room with its

glittering candelabra, fantastic furniture, its central horror of the demon and his masterpiece formed a picture which was burning itself indelibly upon the brain of the unwilling spectator.

"My original idea," resumed the madman, "was, having arranged for the capture of the countess to bind her to my pseudo altar, then to arouse the necessary emotions by explaining the situation to her. Of course I still intend doing this, but events have occurred which will enable me to accentuate my remarks. I shall place before her in review all the sweets of the world she is leaving behind in the bloom of her early youth, laying especial stress upon the first joys of young wifehood, a husband's love and those children she might have given him, the raptures their bright smiles would have brought her. Then when her despair has reached its acme, when she realises all she is losing, when horror, anguish and misery look through eyes that implore for mercy, then and not until then shall I plunge, deep into her breast, the knife which shall intensify the combination of sensations, the expression of which I hope to exemplify in the eyes of the figure in yonder canvas."

The face of the count had become hideous with hate and horror; his eyes were those of the wounded lion who lies powerless in the hands of the hunter.

As the madman ceased he pointed at the ghastly countenance of his listener and broke once more into uncontrollable laughter.

"Ha!" he said, when the fit had passed, "I did

well you will admit, to alter my plans, how much greater the effect will be when your love is aware that you are watching the proceedings which are to immortalise both her and myself: it shall be arranged I assure you that her eyes shall be at liberty to fall upon you until the last moment; the sight of your agony will doubtless redouble her own: she shall draw inspiration from you, as I from her."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FINAL TRAGEDY

"And now, Count," said the archduke, "you wish to know the cause of the strange adventures which have befallen you, or rather you desire me to complete an explanation which your own brain has perhaps to a great extent already furnished.

"It suddenly occurred to me that, as your presence and that of your fiancée was necessary to assist in the preparation of the picture which is to immortalise me, I might realise at the same time another dream of my life, namely to enact and cause others to do so, a romantic mystery play of my own creation. I proposed in lieu of kidnapping you both in a simple and ordinary manner to secure the desired object in a more picturesque fashion and one more suitable for my narrative.

"Tell me, dear Court," said the madman with a malicious snigger, "is not the conception a brilliant one?"

"Marguerite had the honour," he resumed, "of acting the heroine's part, you the hero's, whilst I have been the villain. Who did you really think committed the abduction? Were your suspicions somewhat distributed? As archduke and head of the army and police I have had most excellent opportunities for keeping up my rôle, whilst I must

admit that you have borne you part of the hero well."

The maniac roared with fiendish gratification as he watched the stupefaction of his helpless victim.

"Let us now, my gallant hero," he continued, "go together into the details of my very novel mystery."

So saying he paced the room rapidly with his fingers to his forehead, arranging the events about to be described; then with the self-satisfied air of a professor who is about to prove some great theory to an admiring audience, combined with the manner of a torturer who revels in the agony of the unfortunate individual fate has placed in his clutches, he commenced; whilst upon the wall behind him, as the tale proceeded, his shadow, huge and vague, underwent grotesque contortions as his gestures, the result of intense excitement, became more and more animated.

"Let us begin," he said, "with the business of mystifying and alarming the countess. This was a very simple affair. Fortunately the groom Zitteek had been at one time in my own service and I was well acquainted with the rascal, too well in fact for his peace of mind; this and a small bribe induced him to acquaint me with the habits of the lady and enabled me to present myself in the strange manner which I am aware she has acquainted you with. You will see also that the matter of the letter can be quite easily explained; I hoped to make you suspect Von Graubler, who of course was quite innocent and believed the groom's tale."

To sow suspicion in the minds of your three friends was however a much more difficult task, also it resolved itself into a question of time, for I was anxious that no duels should take place previously to the hour when I could conveniently have them arrested. Your small party suited my plans admirably. Upon the night before their challenging you, they were all three at different hours and unknown to each other, shown the individual, whom Zitteek swore was no other than yourself, in the company of the groom's wife, who is his second spouse and a comparatively young woman and is of the same general appearance as the countess; she was dressed in some garments belonging to the Countess Linzorf. He first made them swear that they would never communicate their knowledge to a living soul save the guilty person, consequently they could not compare notes. He insisted that even the culprit should not be told he had actually been seen by them, for fear that you would guess if told too much, the name of the informant. Neither were they to take any action before at least one night had passed. The reason for this given by Zitteek was that he wished to spare the name of his mistress from dishonour and he feared their anger might lead to a quarrel in the grounds, which would certainly cause scandal. If they guessed each other's mission later, they were not to know Zitteek had told them all; it would merely make them suspect that the matter was so open that it had become generally known. Your own fiery temper could be relied upon not to waste time

on explanations. Also any curiosity each might have felt as to how the other two received their knowledge was submerged by the fact that they thought they had actually seen you; their oath had been given not to mention the subject to anyone, and as long as they could try to kill you all else mattered little. Had either of them broken his oath in the grounds, attacked and recognised me, you will admit, I think, that my sword play was efficient enough to deal with the situation and eliminate an undesirable witness.

Although my clothes closely resembled yours on this occasion, I was not masked, merely taking the precaution to keep in the shadow with my hat well down over my eyes, similarity of height and the assurance of Zitteek, who swore meetings were of frequent occurrence, prevented any suspicion even of doubt. Of course in a stronger light than that of the moon the fraud might have been discovered. To have masked myself whilst remaining in clothes which were like those known to all the neighbourhood would have been absurd and excited their suspicion probably as to whether I was yourself or not. The conditions were quite different however when you saw a masked man in habiliments similar to yours, it added to the puzzle and there was no chance of your obtaining a solution.

If the three could be persuaded to leave for home peaceably that night, my arrangement of sending you to Oranz to meet the writer of the letter, would prevent any action on their part until your return, as no one would know your destination if you acted

as directed and as I had every reason to believe you would. My knowledge of your secret family history imparted to me by my father, who received it from your grandfather, stood me in good stead. You could not have proved an alibi, as although at Oranz an hour after daybreak you might easily have been at Maros when the last of your friends thought he saw you. I was anxious to ensure your not returning before nightfall in order to prevent the inevitable duels taking place that day and before I could seize your friends. You see how well I judged them; they did not take long to act.

Zitteek spoke to each of the three as though that particular individual had always been the one which he had personally desired as a husband for his mistress and therefore appealed naturally to him in the emergency. They were all completely deceived.

"Had the challenges not been given, and of course it was practically a certainty they would be, the three men would have been arrested and other means adopted to throw your suspicions on them; in fact in several instances I had prepared alternate plans in case of failure of the originals. My only fear was that your young bloods would cause a combat before you separated, as in that case probably my little drama could never have been carried out; nevertheless the picture could still have been completed. There was not much fear of your daring to tell your friends the absurd story of Marguerite seeing a masked man in clothes like yours; if you had done so neither of them would have believed it, as it would have looked too much

like a prearranged deliberate lie and you would have been told so: which must have rendered a fight even more certain. I of course fully calculated upon this when arranging the details of the scheme.

"After the challenges were given, they all fell easily into the snares I had laid for them and were seized on their way to their respective homes, the reason which I gave to the leaders of my men being one which I used throughout the whole drama effectively, namely that your friends were members of a gigantic conspiracy, the object of which was my overthrow and the establishment of my brother.

"Your friends, including the guardian, were told, with variations peculiar to each case, that you had abducted the countess. Certain of my people and friends knew that I had done so, but believed it to be a countermove to distract you. All were told to keep their own counsel and tell no one more than was absolutely necessary for carrying out my orders; as I said, I could be sure of no one for a few days. You were a desperate conspirator to all, and to your friends a libertine and an enigma. As events occurred, so I explained them to suit my purpose.

"Madame du Soissons, whom I told a tale to suit the circumstances, was I believed under the impression that you committed all the murders, how very much I was deceived will appear later. She, and other ladies of her acquaintanceship, who saw only the two scenes of the drama, were induced to take part in the affair at the Chateau Dannerg.

You were conducted to this place by the footpath of course to preclude any possibility of your being seen, although precautions had been taken to intercept chance travellers. The apparent necessity for silence was one of my little subtleties.

"Count," cried the madman, convulsed afresh at the idea of the terrible strain to which his victim had been subjected, "was this not a superb, nay a colossal idea the mummery at the chateau? Ha! ha! you do not agree, of course it is a question of the point of view.

"Moerverek, the astute spy, fell an easy prey to my plans; he also was informed that a conspiracy was afoot and instructed to proceed along the road to Herlanz junction, close to which place he was told he would be mistaken for Von Heiner, an error which was not to be corrected, and might meet with an adventure. Of course I was not quite sure at the time what would really occur. If you had not suggested meeting him on the road, Madame du Soissons would have done so. He was as mystified as yourself, but loved excitement and acted his part admirably. Of course you expected to see a man like yourself, but the very fact of his being totally different must have added to your perplexities. I have endeavoured to produce the whole drama on parallel lines with this. It was indeed unfortunate that the exigencies of the work required the sudden demise of Moerverek in the latter part of the story."

"You murdered him?" groaned the count.

"Stay, good friend," roared the maniac with

ferocious joy, licking his cruel lips, "you are pressing forward too rapidly, the plot is interesting I admit, but all will be explained in proper order.

"The instructions to repair to the Chateau of Waltzen, where I had been bolted in the room by one of my trusty spies and your discovery of myself of course you now comprehend. I commend to you as a feature of this point of the story the admirable management of Madame du Soissons. Von Rootzen had instructions to watch you enter the building and then to follow after a short interval; wherever and at whatever part of the old mansion you had been found it is obvious there was a case against you. It may be necessary to inform you that it was really myself who appeared to you in the dungeon of the castle and that both Her Highness and the Captain of the Guard were also under the impression that you were the ringleader of a conspiracy with the objective before mentioned. I stole the letter addressed to your three friends, whilst you slept.

"The burning of the chateau, the shots fired as you passed along the road, were events necessary to make the drama picturesque and all a mere bagatelle to one holding the position of Archduke of Bremlauz.

"And now again we reach a stage at which I was called upon to take a leading part in my wild story.

"Tell me, Count," said the archduke with a fresh outburst of devilish mirth, "was there any fault to find with my rendering of the abductor?

The work was easily accomplished with the aid of the groom's wife and daughter; were you aware that Marguerite's maid was the daughter of the groom Zitteek by his first wife? I waited at the bend of the road until your arrival, which was half an hour later than I imagined it would be, my spy informing me of the right moment to dash round the curve. By then the effect of the opiate given to Marguerite, which was not as strong as it should have been, passed away and she awakened. However as it happened all was for the best and the fact of her being awake added to the excitement of that scene. To my dying day I shall never forget your face as it appeared above that breach in the wall. The histrionic merit of my other spy's acting was too I believe of the best. The letter supposed to have been written by Von Waldeau was forged by myself.

"To ensure your passing along the road to Vaschauz was of course necessary; the letter so valiantly forced from the possession of Colluen and the silken bow upon the road answered their purpose admirably; the spy had instructions to make you apparently drag the missive from him somehow.

"I was not sure if you would decide to first investigate the chateau; we were of course concealed in rooms that you would have had some difficulty in discovering had you searched for a week.

"Ha! I have forgotten the voice of Von Meinter heard by you before your seizure at the road leading to the chateau; it was indeed your friend calling

upon Von Waldeau, under pressure from a dagger held at his throat by one of my police; this was of course unnecessary, but it appeared to me to add considerably to the mystification under which my poor hero laboured. He was not aware that you were arrested then, and could not understand why he was compelled to call on Von Waldeau, and why he was kept in a concealed place with his ears stopped.

"And now the affair of Von Waldeau. It was not difficult to arrange his rescue by the groom of Marguerite, and for that gentleman to tell him a tale in which you figured as an abductor, and a scoundrel, who would pass along the Vaschauz road at a certain time bent upon furthering your nefarious designs.

"You will remember, that there is a connection between the two roads which pass around the chateau, about one quarter of a mile upon the Harlanz side of the bridge near which you met him. The groom informed Von Waldeau that it was uncertain by which road you were coming, consequently he waited at the bridge as it was just beyond the junction, in order that you could not possibly escape him. To Zitteek are due your thanks for preserving your valuable life, Count, or at least preventing a deadly encounter; you will remember that he is the finest shot in the neighbourhood. He was told to shoot in time to prevent any possibility of your being killed, and before anything could be said by Von Waldeau which would explain matters to you.

"The innkeepers at Orlau and Orsavo were both bribed, and believed the tale of the conspiracy against me. I trust that they carried out the minor parts allotted to them in a satisfactory manner. I knew of course you would call at the former hostelry to make enquiries. With the exception of the horse of Von Waldeau, which I have been informed flashed riderless through the village of Orlau, their stories were entirely the result of my imagination; none of the characters mentioned by them passed along the road; your horse was killed by a trustworthy servant of the man at Orsavo.

"The archduchess and the Captain of the Guard acted according to my instructions in proceeding by the short cut to Vaschauz and awaiting your arrival at the inn; they did so under the impression that you were engaged in a conspiracy.

"I pass over these points rapidly, because I am anxious to receive your opinion upon the situation at the chateau. The idea of your being received by the heroine, Marguerite, who is forced to poison her own lover, appears to me to be unique. You wonder why, knowing that she was about to administer poison, she was prevailed upon to offer you the wine Quite a simple matter, dear Count, I assure you. I appeared to her after the abduction as the archduke, saying that you were engaged in a conspiracy against me, and I had seized her partly as a hostage, that I loved you as a father loves his son and was anxious to spare you, but that you must be temporarily deprived of your liberty immediately, and that the only way to accomplish this, without possible

resistance on your part, which might result in injury to you, was by rendering you insensible.

"I pointed out that I must capture and punish the remainder of the conspirators and in order to do this cunning must be met with cunning and treachery with treachery. I explained that I had a plan which would place all the criminals in my power provided that you, who possessed important written instructions, upon which the joint movements of the conspirators depended, were at once seized; any delay, I said would be fatal to my interests.

"She of course demurred, afraid of killing you and fearing my motives, saying that you would not wish her to be the means of men losing their lives. I swore that no one should die, and that only mild punishment, sufficient to act as a warning, should be administered, pointing out that I had the right to protect my own dominions and that the conspirators were aggressors and really deserved some chastisement. I also showed her that if I wished to kill you, the matter would be quite easy as I possessed ample evidence to exonerate me for slaying a dangerous traitor, and threatened if my commands were not obeyed to have you promptly arrested, tried and shot. I again reminded her that you might be killed in the fight attending your capture. She was told that you had been informed that the masked man who seized her was Von Waldeau, who had done so out of spite. I explained that Von Waldeau was one of the leading conspirators, that in the event of no letter being found on you, I hoped to get you to speak by causing you to be

furious with the treachery of Von Waldeau, which was the secondary aim I had in view when abducting her. She wavered, but I threatened to torture you before her eyes if she refused. Ultimately the Countess yielded to my persuasion, and swore to carry out my wishes, and I must admit that the honour of the Linzorfs carried her through an exceedingly trying situation. Decidedly my choice of a heroine was justified. Similar reasons account for her conduct here to-night. She was told that you still refused to believe she loved Von Waldeau, and might speak if made to realise it. Tell me, Count, did not the finding of the body of Moerverek puzzle you? It was necessary to complicate matters. Who did you think had committed the abduction at this period? I of course followed you to Maros, and the attempt upon your life scene was a mere matter of detail. You will of course see that it was only pretence, and that your death at that moment was the last thing I desired; nevertheless it added to the interest of the plot, whilst you were searching I started for Bremlauz. I inspired the gipsy with the spirit of prophecy.

"The events at the house of Marguerite's guardian were one of the chances of the piece. Madame du Soissons had called merely to advise Von Graubler, whom I had summoned to Bremlauz telling him I had news concerning the abduction, to appear at the ball, and give him certain instructions I considered necessary. I certainly had no hand in the arrangement of the ensuing scene. Madame's fear was of course largely feigned, in order to add to

your mystification, although, at first the unmasking struck her as being awkward. I had certain reasons for wishing madame to remain incognito: you are aware she never visits the palace; she acted her part well, too well in fact for her own future welfare, for from this point the plot was not solely under the control of the author.

"When you informed me that my brother William was amongst those who attacked you, I knew that Madame du Soissons had introduced or was aware of the entrance into my play of characters not arranged for by myself. This I understood from my examination of the lady, who was not aware that you had recognised William when she explained the presence of the men who attacked you, and consequently was less careful than the occasion warranted. I found later from my spies, madame had discovered that there was no conspiracy and under the impression that the archduke was insane," here the madman laughed hilariously, "because he chose to amuse himself in an original way, she appears to have communicated her idea to my brother, who seems to have adopted her views, and decided to let me do as I chose in order that he might give a distorted version of my conduct to the populace. My task was now more interesting, but the difficulties had decidedly increased. It became necessary to crush a real conspiracy as my plot advanced.

"I decided to allow my brother to imagine his presence unknown and develop his conspiracy, frustrating it at the critical moment. I was made

acquainted by my spies with his intended plans and even now the Captain of the Guard, who I must remind you is ignorant of my real intentions towards yourself and imagines you are one of the conspirators, has accomplished his arrest at the moment when William thought victory certain. A well arranged trial will free me from the menace of his existence for ever."

Into the count's eyes there shot a gleam of hope. Had he frustrated the plans of the archduke by wounding the captain? Was it too much to hope that the latter had been unable to take any action? the madman might yet be foiled.

"And now," said the archduke, "doubtless you will desire me to account for the presence of Count Rudolph and Baron von Meinter at the ball and the events which preceded it. They were each liberated from the place where I had imprisoned them, by my myrmidons, who pretended that their capture had been your work, and ordered to present themselves secretly to me, when they were informed that the abduction of Marguerite also was accomplished by you and they were asked to act the part performed by them, being told that the capture of the whole of the conspirators red-handed could thus be brought about. They were totally mystified at your apparently extraordinary conduct. A similar explanation applies to the behaviour and presence of Von Graubler, who however appears to have been suspicious of me after the narration of your adventures to him. At what precise period he began to think I was deceiving him and not you I cannot

say. Fortunately, however, he feared me and my knowledge of his infamy sufficiently to be deterred from giving you information or putting you on your guard at the ball. It was my voice you heard in the room. Whether he thinks now that I actually abducted his ward of course I cannot say, but I have an explanation which will satisfy him; it is as well to make sure," the maniac said with a frightful laugh.

"Now with regard to the events which occurred between the time when you left me in the palace until the man who gave you the picture disappeared. Just as you believed they were partaking in some extraordinary affair with Von Heiner so they thought you were, and trusted me for the most part implicitly. Those who took part in the chess drama and the supposed recalling of the past, were told that there was a strange secret with which you were acquainted, connected with the statue of a horse in which a jewel had been hidden, associated with your family, and that a plan had been laid to entrap you: exactly what it was they were not told, but the three were given their parts and the ideas that they should convey, and the rest was to be left to me.

"Each was as I said before, told as much as I deemed necessary and instructed to communicate with no one else. I knew if anyone suspected I was merely amusing myself with you I could trust them to oblige an archduke and keep a still tongue.

"Pauline was shocked by your revelation of the murder and scarcely credited your explanation. She

became suspicious and regretted her share in the affair; fortunately she was too much afraid of me to refuse to complete her part. Her acting was especially good because excitement and fear really made her feel ill. I have since satisfied her that all is as it should be. The girl was of course strangled by me before being thrown into the room. My spies held you prisoner whilst I captured the actress. Madame's discovery of the body was an accident, but we appeared to mutually satisfy one another. The lady friends of Madame du Soissons had reasons given similar to those advanced for the Dannerg affair.

"Perhaps it did not strike you that the deaf old man was the disguised Archduke of Bremlauz. "The explanation to Rudolph and Von Meinter at this juncture was a difficult matter; they thought you had committed the murder of the woman who was strangled; they believed that there was a Von Heiner and that you were taking advantage of the resemblance. Rudolph knew it was you after the duel scene but believed the reason for your acting to be very different from the one it was. He thought you believed your deception was successful.

"Of course I had no intention of killing you, as the coachman, whose position I sometimes occupied.

"Your arrest was planned by me and carried out with the aid of the innkeeper and my spy who represented the countryman. The simple-minded magistrate was easily deceived. Your servant was bribed heavily. I also made a present to you of the

painting which must have puzzled you considerably, it was however truly a key to the mystery, for the daubs covered some of my many failures. The ultimate arrest and trial of my brother William will prove my statements as far as all the survivors are concerned and your death and that of the countess can easily be accounted for as the murder, by a disappointed conspirator of his love, under mysterious circumstances in the archduke's palace; the bodies can be arranged to lend countenance to this; my own disappearance from the ballroom will be naturally accounted for as due to necessary precautions taken with the knowledge that my life was in danger."

The lunatic shrieked again at the thought of his cunning, too mad to observe that his machinations and arrangements for explanation must ultimately break down in practice for all their devilish ingenuity; although they had succeeded to the extent of placing his victims in his power, it was merely due to the limited time over which the events extended and his arrangements for keeping those concerned from comparing notes.

"It is well for you, Count," he continued, "that you refused to act upon the advice of my brother, for had you agreed to do so, I, who was listening, would have shot you dead then. I think I understand William's motives at that juncture but that is quite immaterial: at least it is certain his proposals were not for your benefit unless he gained by the arrangement.

"Madame du Soissons paid for her intrigue with

her life; doubtless the timely hints to my brother would have brought their reward after my deposition. I presume that thinking I was mad, she considered the best policy lay in being the instrument which summoned his successor to power: many have died for less than this and I do not recognise this woman as a martyr to my craving for effect.

"I was puzzled by the appearance of the archduchess at the summerhouse, after my vengeance upon madame, who made her arrangements with you by orders; hearing a footfall I slipped from the arbour: my wife appeared and entered the place. Not quite knowing what to do I waited a few minutes deliberating when you came upon the scene. I presume the archduchess fainted."

The madman having completed his hideous narrative, paused and looked at his victim as some denizen of the forest might have regarded the prey which it was about to devour and that it was disporting itself with preparatory to the meal in store.

The count had almost ceased to feel; his emotions had exhausted him so much that he rested against the back of the huge chair for support.

Suddenly there fell upon the ears of both the sound of a mighty blow. Into the eyes of the madman there sprang a look of ferocious anger, whilst in those of Adrian flashed the light of hope.

Then blow after blow fell with rapidity upon a door evidently outside the one to be seen in the room.

The maniac realised that his prey was about to be

torn from him, and with a snarl as vicious as that of tiger, seized the unfortunate count by the throat.

"You think, fool," he howled, "that your friends will save you and your pretty Marguerite! Listen! it will take a quarter of an hour to destroy the massive wood and iron door of the anteroom and as long again to break down this one. Before that work is accomplished I shall have immortalised myself."

With a wild hysterical shriek, he released the count, sprang across the room and through the tapestry, appearing a moment later with the struggling Countess Linzorf.

With scarcely an effort he seized the terrified girl in his arms and laid her upon the pseudo altar, then grasping both her hands he placed them in his own left hand and pressed them upon her body in such a manner that she was unable to rise.

The count strove fiercely to release himself, sinking back in silent agony as he realised once more his helplessness.

"O Adrian! Adrian! gasped the terrified girl," I lied! I love you! What does this mean? Save me!"

"I cannot," answered the unhappy count. "Forgive my doubt; I know that you acted for the best."

With his right arm the madman felt for and drew forth a dagger.

A fresh burst of horrible laughter issued from his throat.

"He is mad, Adrian! Mad! Mad! Mad! save

me, my love! My love!" shrieked the frenzied Marguerite.

"Listen, Countess," the lunatic said, "there sits your lover, the man—"

"Spare her that! O you foul hound!" roared the almost delirious count; then knowing that there was no hope of stopping the demon before him he covered his eyes with his hands.

At that moment however something occurred; the countess fainted: this was the one thing which the madman had not calculated upon.

At the same instant there was a frightful crash; the outer door had fallen; the archduke had overestimated its strength.

He emitted a howl of baffled rage, a cry so terrible that the horrified count felt compelled to ascertain the cause. The archduke, foaming with fury at the knowledge that at the eleventh hour the scheme of his life was to be thwarted, regarded him with a look of fiendish malevolence. Adrian realised what had occurred but his brain dared not suggest a hope.

Suddenly the countenance of his enemy was further animated by a diabolical expression of triumph.

"If I cannot draw inspiration from her eyes,' he hissed, "at least yours are available, Count, what I intended to say to Marguerite, those ideas calculated to rouse the great expression, you already know, and can adapt them to yourself. The spectacle you are about to witness will intensify the glance I wish to delineate. Look! look! Count Adrian, see the

bride that was to be the mother of your children, with one blow of this sharp knife I will place between you and your happiness the infinite gulf across which sighs of mortals have been wafted unheeded throughout the ages; this accomplished the second blow shall be yours and the agony of your last expression will be transferred to yonder canvas and burn in the eyes of the portrait of her you love, the wonder of all futurity."

The maniac stood with uplifted weapon above the prostrate figure, so pathetic in its lovely helplessness, gazing across at the count. The resounding blows of the rescuers fell upon the stout door which was much stronger than the first. The count was speaking; his voice reached the ears of the lunatic between the blows of the ram, the passion of despair in it was tempered by a strange joy.

"At least devil," he shouted, "I can foil you in that, the murder I have no power to prevent your committing, but I can and will rob you of your ambition: these eyes I now close, they shall not open again upon this side of the grave."

The maniac gazed upon the closed lids; like Adrian previously, he had missed some words, but understood the general purport.

A frightful spasm shook his whole frame, he gasped for breath; the speech of the count had struck him to the centre of his mad brain, as though it had been a bullet: the idea around which his whole existence had revolved for years, ever increasing in magnitude, was shattered; the reaction was terrific; the knife dropped to the

floor; he flung his hands to his head with a cry that might have represented the expression of the concentrated agony of a million tortured souls; then fell backward with extended arms dead.

The count did not stir, he had fallen against the back of the chair; the awful dying scream of the madman, interpreted by him to signify thwarted ambition and vengeance upon her he loved, prostrated him and he had fainted.

The apartment resounted with the blows of the rescuers; the door yielded; wood and iron were splintered and twisted: a more powerful ram was brought to bear; there was one resounding crash and the crowd poured wildly into the room to observe the candles lighting a scene so tragic and mysterious that they felt the very hair bristling upon their scalps.

"I have written the above at the request of my dear friend, Count Adrian, upon whom the horrors of the last few events in the drama have left so deep an impression that he cannot allow, even now, twenty years after the occurrence, his mind to dwell upon them.

"Signed, Kibzek."

There are one or two points which were not made clear by the archduke. The archduchess, who has now been dead many years, believed me to be engaged in a conspiracy at first, but ultimately suspected the archduke and Madame du Soissons of plotting against me for some reason. She became acquainted with the arrangement for the meeting at the summer house and went there with

the intention of saving my life. I never ascertained her exact object in carrying the sheathed dagger, nor her proposed line of conduct. Undoubtedly she had received information at the last moment and hardly knew how to act. The sight of the unfortunate Madame du Soissons completely unnerved her. What she told me concerning her feelings towards myself was I have reason to think true: her insinuations against Marguerite at the inn were the deliberate falsehoods of a jealous woman.

The conduct of the archduke's brother is easily explained as due to the unscrupulous designs of an ambitious and vicious nature. He considered that it would be better if his brother could be killed, for if he were merely secured as a madman the insanity might at some time leave him, a result which would entail loss of power to William. The archduke had no children and William was the heir to the archdukedom. Had I taken his advice and succeeded, he would doubtless have denied giving it, merely taking credit to himself for warning me that I was in danger and explaining that he was not acquainted with the archduke's plot but only suspected he was mad. He did not fear my telling the archduke, for he was in full possession of all the facts of the case and was certain that he had sufficient proofs to enable him to incarcerate his brother. As it was he said that he did not know his brother's murderous plans concerning me but had made arrangement to have him seized on the following day: the archduchess had fled stating what she saw; this coming to his ears, had, he said,

roused his suspicions. How much he really knew is of course uncertain, but that he was aware the countess and I ran a frightful risk of some sort is certain. The archduke was observed carrying someone towards his studio it was said. All these things I knew later and was unable to prove.

The death of Madame du Soissons was welcome to William, for it removed a dangerous woman who was acquainted with the extent of his villainy.

William himself had led the rescuing party knowing that he would find at least conclusive proof of his brother's insanity. The reason for his appearance when I was taking Madame du Soissons to the archduke's I have never ascertained; probably he had arrived from his place of exile at the house of the woman, found her missing and traced her to the general's. Madame du Soissons had sent for him presumably at an early stage of the affair and deemed it necessary to speak to him at once; the possibility of my death did not trouble her. William must have seen in a flash the advantage of allowing the Archduke to carry on his scheme, and thus give greater proof of his madness.

The Captain of the Guard, who in his zeal and love for the archduchess exceeded his instructions in trying to stop me by means of wounding or killing me, recovered from his injuries.

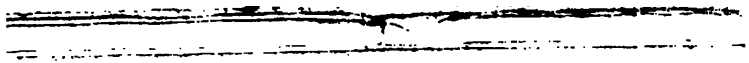
Madame du Soissons met with a terrible end, but her conduct, coupled with her hypocrisy at the ball, showed her to be an infamous and pitiless creature.

With the passing away of the most terrible crisis of my life there vanished the ceaseless misfortune

and sorrow that had been my constant companion. The awful events which destroyed the lives of so many and threatened to engulf my dear Marguerite and myself in their fury, although impressing upon us the stamp of a great trial, left us to enjoy many delightful years of unalloyed happiness.

THE END

The Anchor Press Ltd., Tiptree. Essex.



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